

The Bet: A Study In Scarlet

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Category: Ranma

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 1999-12-23 08:00:00

Updated: 1999-12-23 08:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 11:06:50

Rating: T

Chapters: 5

Words: 35,831

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: An altered universe fic, where Akane's the strongest one there is!

1. Default Chapter Title

THE BET: A STUDY IN SCARLET "The Bet" Original idea by Gregg Sharp
Original Bet Entry: "A Study In Scarlet" by Gregg Sharp (used with permission)
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Toltiir was bored.

The Bet was over. Titania had taken the honours, everybody was just pleased as punch with the way the faerie queen's timeline was playing out, and all was right in the multiverse-

Except for the rather salient fact that Toltiir was still bored.

The God (who sometimes, but not always, happened to look like a member of that most noble of species, *felis domesticus*,) stretched and yawned. For one brief, sweet moment in the eternity of his existence, the other Gods had paid attention to his little corner of the multiverse. Oh, sure, he still got invited to all the best parties, but... He sat up, paused a moment to scratch fitfully behind a pointed ear, and padded over to the Well.

To his surprise, a small black spider was perched at the lip, peering

into the waters with all the intensity eight eyes could muster. The swirling waters of the Well displayed a rather late period of Toltiir's favorite timeline, the one with that always-entertaining Ranma kid.

Toltiir ahemed politely, and nodded as the small arachnid turned to look.

"Fun mortal, hmm? That Ranma kid's a hoot..."

With a small flash, the spider disappeared, to be replaced with a ravishing vision of feminine pulchritude; curves in all the right places, (If you happened to be of the humanoid persuasion, that is.) blue-black skin, long flowing silver hair and delicately pointed ears. She smiled pleasantly at him and scratched that little spot just above the tail he could never reach.

"Hey-ya, Lloth-baby..." Toltiir purred. "What brings you to my neck of the woods? That Do'Urden guy getting boring?"

"Tsk... Now, now, little tricky-kitty. No need to mention that particular nuisance..." Her eyes flashed menacingly once before returning to their pleasant gaze. "I've been busy, and I only just heard about your amusing little wager. Is there still time for me to play?"

Toltiir's ears perked up at the thought of his boredom being relieved, if only temporarily.

"Actually, the Bet's over. Titania won..."

"TITANIA?!! That jumped-up little pixie?! I can do a better job than her!!!" Toltiir gave a feline smirk as his words had the desired effect on the Sidhe-hating goddess.

"We-ll, the OFFICIAL contest is over, but... You up for a little side bet?"

"Interesting... " Lloth said pensively. "What're the stakes?"

"Same as always. You game?"

"All right, but I think I deserve a handicap. Happy-sappy endings aren't my forte..."

"Well, I guess since this is a side-bet, I can bend the rules a little... What did you have in mind?"

The Demon-Queen of Spiders leaned over the well and stirred the waters with one tapered finger. "Observe..." *****

"Oh, man... Ucchan..." Ranma breathed sadly as he looked down at his sleeping friend. She lay on the hospital bed, machines beeping and sighing as they laboured at the difficult job of keeping Ukyou Kuonjii alive. Unnoticed, a tear trickled down Ranma's cheek. Akane reached out to gently squeeze her iinazuke's hand, but he pulled away, gently touching Ukyou's face. "Why'dja hafta listen to the old freak, anyhow? You shoulda known he'd slip you a mickey..." A tiny voice inside his head whispered to him: Yeah, Ranma, and if you'd

just made a damn decision about this whole fiancée mess, she'd never have gone to the old creep for help in the first place...

"Ranma..." Akane said softly. He turned to face her, a questioning frown on his lips.

"Akane, not now, okay? Ucchan needs me."

"She needs her rest, Ranma. The rape crisis counsellor said that he'd be in to talk to her soon... We should go..." Ranma's eyes flashed angrily.

"Like you care, Akane! I know you've always hated Ucchan, but she's one of my oldest friends! I can't just leave her!"

"She's my friend too, Ranma!"

"Yeah, right," he said scornfully. "You're always callin' her Spatula-bimbo 'n stuff! You 'n your stoopid jealousy..."

Akane stood, restraining her impulse to mallet him out of respect for Ukyou's state.

"Fine! BE that way! I'm going home!"

"Go ahead. Y'don't see me stoppin' ya."

Akane flinched at the dismissive, cold tone Ranma addressed her with. He hadn't even looked at her! Hurt, she stormed out. Ranma spared the doorway a glance, before returning his attention to Ukyou.

Stoopid kawaiikune tomboy... He thought angrily. Why can't she stop bein' so damn selfish? Ukyou's gonna need all the help she can get to make it through this. I owe her. It's my damn fault she's in this mess...

A soft curse escaped his lips as he thought of Happosai. Killing him once hadn't been enough; the old freak deserved a thousand times worse for what he'd done...

***** "Whoa, hold on a minute! Lloth, that's nuts! No WAY would the kid take out Happi! The kid doesn't kill-"

"Now, now, Toltiir. He brought down Saffron, didn't he?"

"Well, yeah... in most timelines, anyway... But that's because he though Saffron- Wait. What did you have Happi do?"

Lloth leaned over and whispered in the Cat-God's ear. A shocked and appalled expression grew on his feline features. Were it possible, he would have blanched. As it was, his hackles stood on end and he hissed reflexively.

"THAT'S your handicap? Lloth, you ARE evil..."

"Well, duh..."

Akane walked slowly back towards the Tendou-ke, her eyes on the ground. Anger at Ranma's harsh words warred with sadness over what had happened to poor Ukyou. She hadn't forgiven the okonomiyaki chef for the role she'd played in disrupting her wedding to Ranma last month, but she wouldn't wish THIS on anyone... She shuddered.

I suppose I can't fault Ranma for wanting to stay by her side, she thought. Things were going so well up until the botched wedding, and now... Now, it seemed they were back to where they'd begun last year; Ranma insulted her, she whacked him with whatever was handy. Ukyou's always made a point of wanting to be there for him. I guess it's his turn to be there for her...

Did he have to be so damn cold to her, though? The look on his face... Tears rose in her eyes as she thought about it. It was like he hated her...

These grim thoughts and others accompanied her down the path and back to the house. Instead of going out to the dojo to break some cinderblocks, she resolved to do something constructive with her anger for a change.

She responded to her sisters' hellos with a nod, and headed upstairs to the attic, to the room once occupied by Happosai. The room was a shambles, boxes and sacks filled every corner. Slowly, methodically, she began to sort through the detritus accumulated over three hundred years of perversion.

Women's undergarments she sorted into a pile for burning, even those she recognized as belonging to herself or her sisters. She didn't want ANYthing the old bastard had touched anywhere NEAR her from this point on.

Everything else she found, including scrolls, jewellery or assorted other items she didn't even WANT to identify, she sorted into a second pile for later disposal. She'd take them down to Cologne at the Nekohanten in the morning. She'd know what to do to destroy them safely.

Several hours later, she was halfway through the second pile when she heard Ranma's familiar "Tadaima!" as he came home. She stood, brushed off her skirt, and went downstairs to meet him. Placing a foot on the staircase, she heard him speak to Kasumi. She froze as she heard her name mentioned.

"... Akane's not helpin', Kasumi. It's like she don't even care about what happened to Ucchan."

"Now, Ranma-kun, that's not fair."

"Ain't it? I dunno... All's I'm sayin' is that she got all uncute and jealous again. I'm just tryin' to look after my friend an' she gets all possessive 'n stuff. D'ya believe she almost went all 'Ranma No Baka' on me? In a hospital no less! I swear, that tomboy's unstable or somethin'..."

"Oh, I'm sure it wasn't anything like that..." Kasumi said in a worried tone. "She wouldn't have..."

"You didn't see the look in her eyes, Kasumi. Trust me, I know what

her 'whack Ranma' face looks like after all this time. She's drivin' me crazy!"

At the top of the stairs, Akane snarled. He thinks I'm unstable? I'm making HIM crazy? Her knuckles went white as she clenched her hand on the banister. The wood broke off in her grip with a loud crunch.

The sound brought Kasumi and Ranma running.

"Akane?" Kasumi said worriedly as she took in the sight. Ranma desperately tried to extract his foot from his mouth.

"A-akane! I didn't mean-"

"So... That's how you really feel about me?"

"No! I-"

"FINE!" Akane screamed, whipping the chunk of banister at her iinazuke and rapping him soundly off the head. She stomped off back upstairs to the attic, Ranma quick on her heels.

"Akane! Wait a minute!"

"SHUT UP RANMA!!!! YOU CAN GO TO HELL FOR ALL I CARE!!!"

"Akane..."

"NO! YOU JERK!!" She reached around for something, anything to throw at him. Her hand found a black rod about a foot long covered in strange runic script. Hefting it, she wound up to pitch. "I WISH YOU WERE DEAD!!!!!!!!!"

Akane disappeared in a flash as an explosion rocked the attic, blowing Ranma off his feet.

"AKANE!!!" He found his footing and staggered forward, waving his arms to clear the smoke. "Akane...? Where are you?! ANSWER ME!!!"

No answer came.

"OhNoOhNoOhNoOhNoOhNoOhNo....." He searched frantically through the clearing cloud, finding nothing in the attic but a pile of smouldering underwear, and a scorched silhouette of Akane on the wall.

"AAAKAAAAANEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Hmm." Toltiir said, putting the Well on fast-forward to watch the subsequent events. "So Ranma's devastated, blames himself, and goes into mourning. Eventually, with Ukyou's help, he comes to terms with his loss. The Tendous adopt Ukyou into their family registry and Ranma marries her three years later, thus uniting the schools. They have lots of kids and live happily-ever-after, more or less. I don't know, Lloth-baby. Ranma and Ukyou... It's been done before. Akane gettin' blown up like that's new, but I still think you lose. You owe

me a Coke."

"Tsk. I'm not through yet."

"Well, the timeline plays out on a pretty average track thereafter, so I fail to see the big change. Game, set and match to me."

"For an omniscient being, you don't pay much attention to details, do you? Here..." She stirred the waters, rewinding the scene and focusing in on the rune-carved rod Akane picked up. "Doesn't that look familiar to you?"

"Hey... isn't that a Wand of Wishes? Wait a sec, shouldn't Ranma have died, then?"

"Well, it's more like a Wand of Monkey's Paw Wishes, actually. Fast forward... oh, about seven thousand years give or take, to Aramar, in the Seventh Age."

"Hey! I didn't say you could play in MY pool. I stay out of Oerth and Toril..." "I promise I won't break anything..."

"Oh, all right... You MIGHT let me know what you've got in mind, though..." Toltiir fretted. Maybe letting Lloth play WAS a bad idea...

"Wait and see, kitty-cat, wait and see. I'm not done weaving my web..."

___/Cliffs Of Athaq, Aramar, 543 7th Age_____

She was old, older even than Cologne had been back in the unimaginably distant Furinkan days. Bent but not broken by her years, she had given up on finding what she had sought for her first century of life here. Until just under a week ago, when Baron had brought her a bit of news.

A deep rumble brought her attention to her travelling companions. The dragon was moving back, giving her time to be alone now that her quest was finally at an end.

"You needn't do that, Baron," Akane addressed the dragon. "I might as well say goodbye now. I've been formulating the wording for this for weeks."

Careful, child, the dragon's mental voice was surprisingly gentle for a creature of his size. *Wishes from the djinni are difficult to fix, this is a thousand times a thousand more so.*

"Well, if it didn't have that sort of power output, it wouldn't be able to accomplish what it needs to, ne?" Akane looked back at one of the few still-living friends she'd made in this world. A misfit, much like herself, and a dragon- one whose life span was normally measured in centuries instead of decades. "I shall miss you, old friend."

And I, you, child. Don't you go and forget your friends now. The dragon turned to face the entry to the cave, the red-gold of his

scales catching the flickering light of the guardian beast's pyre.
Best to get this over with, and try not to end up back here. This particular method will only work once, you know.

"Ah yes," Akane reached out and laid her palm on the crystalline shape before her. Wishes were a tricky thing in the best of circumstances, as she well knew. After all, it had been a casually expressed wish that had gotten her into this mess.

"I invoke the sacred contract, and in the name of the nine gods of this world do make my wish be known." This part was required, a sort of magical access code. "I wish to travel back along the paths of time and space, to my plane of origin, to the time when I was still enrolled in Furinkan Senior High School, knowing then what I know now, but to be the age I was when I was there originally, with minimal disruption to the timestream from my entry."

Nicely worded, came the dragon's thought. *I think you forgot something though. Oh well, too late, maybe it'll work out anyway.* Baron's tail lashed in irritation. He had to get moving soon anyway, Akane had developed many enemies over her long life, and no doubt one or two would show up before long.

Akane briefly saw an image of herself, though much older and with a sad air about her. Then came a feeling as if she were shoved aside by an irresistible force.

Akane looked about herself, smiling a little as she took in the old dojo.

She could barely remember it, so many years and so many events had passed. A pile of bricks were stacked nearby. With a quick grin she picked the top one up and crushed it in her grip.

"There you go again, Akane, no wonder the boys think you're so weird."

Akane stared, tears coming to her eyes. "Na-Nabiki?!"

Nabiki took a step away. "Akane, what?"

Akane moved so quickly that Nabiki only saw a blur before she was swept up and swung around in her sister's embrace.

"NABIKI! By the Seal, it's been so long!"

"Uhm, right, Akane. It's been at least a couple of hours." Nabiki wondered exactly what Akane was going on about, when she noticed how odd Akane's embrace felt. There was no give, as if she were being hugged by a statue.

"Is everyone here? Is Ranma here? Oh, kami, I've missed you!"

"Who's Ranma?"

Akane blinked at that. Her face went blank as she worked out the

possible ramifications of that question. Funny, she had been working out how to get here for so long that she'd never considered what to do when she actually did get back.

"Anyway, Akane, Father's got some sort of announcement he wants to hit us with, so he's called a family meeting."

"It's THAT day?" Akane slowly grinned. "Oh, kami, there are things I've wanted to change about that day..."

Nabiki began to look worriedly at her sister. "Sis, you okay?"

"Let's go have that family meeting, Nabiki. I haven't felt _this_ good in ages."

It HAD been a long time, and Akane didn't remember a lot of the things that had happened way back when. *Or should that be, way back now,* Akane pondered.

Nabiki's constant poking of the little girl's breasts, with her being quite upset about the fiance not being a boy after all. It would be enough that the two would never get along thereafter.

Kasumi was mainly polite, but would never consider Ranma due to the incredible gulf of three years difference on their ages. Akane inwardly chuckled at THAT. If Kasumi knew how much older her younger sister was now, she'd flip.

"Nabiki," Akane gently chided, "Ranma is our guest whether he's a boy or a girl. Ranma, would you care to join me in the dojo? I'm Akane, do you want to be friends?"

Ranma seemed a little intimidated, that smile wasn't a cute little girl grin, but the sort of smile that usually accompanied phrases like "paybacks are a bitch." Still, what harm could it be? She nodded.

Akane was aware of Nabiki following them. She was pretty sure that hadn't happened the first time, so she must have done something to throw Nabiki's natural curiosity into high gear.

It had been so long, so very, very, long, since she'd made that first wish. An odd item from Happosai's "treasure trove" in her hands during one of the usual arguments, and she'd wished Ranma was dead. The rod was of the djinni, and it worked by altering the wielder. So it merely moved her forward in time, to a time where not only Ranma but any of Ranma's lineage were long gone in their graves. The Seventh Age Of Man, where she'd done things that made even Ranma's life look tame.

"Uhm, you okay, Akane?" Ranma was looking at her curiously. "You seemed to go asleep there for a minute."

Akane blinked and shook her head. "I'm fine, Ranma. You've studied kempo, right?"

"A little," was Ranma's response as she turned her attention to the dojo.

"Well, then, let's have a little match." Akane noted Ranma looked a little uncertain. "Just for fun. Don't worry, I won't go all out on you."

"Uhm, yeah, sure." Ranma stopped and her eyes widened.

Akane realized that Ranma was reading her stance, like any martial artist would, and was revising her opinion of Akane's skill level accordingly. Ranma shifted into a defensive stance immediately.

Akane's grin was like a wolf that had just found fresh prey.

Akane sent a couple of quick jabs towards Ranma, nothing fancy. Ranma blocked them and jumped over the leg sweep. Each getting the feel for the other's skill level.

Akane cranked the speed up a notch. "You can fight back now, or don't you take me seriously?"

Ranma was still dodging. "I don't hit girls..." Well, there WAS that fight with Shampoo.

"Oh, really? You know when I said I wouldn't go all out?" Akane spoke in a calm voice that didn't match the double circle kick she had just executed. "I lied."

Nabiki's eyes widened as the already fast battle turned into something she'd never expected. Akane launched one attack after another, moving more fluidly than she had ever done in her life, and this Ranma was just barely dodging them. As it was there were rips appearing in Ranma's clothing from the near misses.

"Think that's bad, Ranma, check this out," Akane thought this would give Ranma reason to stay on her good side. "Black Rose Torture Fist!"

Ranma flew across the room, slamming into and through the dojo wall, going down and twisting in agony as she did.

"Hang on, Ranma, I'll be right there," Akane smiled. This ought to knock some sense into him early on in their relationship. He'd take her skills seriously if nothing else.

"What did you do?!" Nabiki stared at the figure out in the yard. She'd heard the phrase writhing in pain before, but had never seen it. This certainly fit.

Akane walked over to the nearly unconscious figure and struck three times in very precise locations. "Black Rose Torture Fist, a nerve strike technique that causes excruciating pain to the target, often stops a fight without actually causing permanent damage."

Ranma shuddered and gradually uncurled, looking at her hands as if surprised that they were still intact.

"I'm getting a bath, Ranma, don't you dare walk in on me," Akane called out as she walked back to the house. Things were getting better already. She'd have Ranma's respect from the very beginning this time.

Nabiki watched her sister go back into the house, then turned back to Ranma. She didn't think there was ANY chance of Ranma walking in on Akane. The look of fear on the younger girl's face was just too clear an indication of that.

Noting how pale Ranma was, and the sweat and shaking muscles, Nabiki felt a sudden wave of a foreign emotion to her. Pity. Ranma had not only been beaten, but thoroughly humiliated in seconds.

Nabiki didn't exactly know how to comfort, TLC wasn't one of her strengths, but she knew whose it was. Nabiki went to the kitchen. She needed Kasumi.

"I'm Genma Saotome," Genma gestured at the boy next to him. "This is my son, Ranma."

"Are you really her, the girl we saw earlier?" Kasumi watched carefully. Nabiki was right. Ranma wouldn't even look in Akane's direction and seemed very nervous.

"I am," Ranma's voice was soft in reply.

"It's such a long story," Genma said after a moment. "I don't know where to begin. Well, then," he threw Ranma into the pond.

Ranma, now a girl, spluttered up and began to run back and confront her father when she caught sight of Akane's smirk. She froze.

"Father, you certainly have some unusual friends," Kasumi said in the silence that followed. She saw fear briefly in the young girl's face. A quick glance confirmed that she was looking directly at Akane.

"Told you," came a whisper from Nabiki managing to look as if she had just accidently brushed Kasumi as she got up.

Kasumi absent-mindedly nodded. She wasn't sure about Nabiki's story about how Akane had acted in the dojo, but her initial reaction of sibling rivalry was beginning to look a little less likely.

Soun continued on with his explanation of Jusenkyo and its curses, oblivious to what was going on around him. Even Genma had realized something was up at this point, just seeing his son fail to react as he normally would, had given him pause.

"Well, your problem isn't so bad, is it?" Soun went out into the yard and guided girl-type Ranma into the house, not noticing that Ranma was trying deliberately not to look in a particular direction again.

Akane frowned briefly. What was wrong with him, anyway? He had never acted like this before. Ranma didn't even seem to want to look in her

general direction.

"This is my oldest daughter, Kasumi, she's 19. This is my middle daughter, Nabiki, she's 17. This is my youngest daughter, Akane, she's 16. Pick anyone you like, she'll be your new fiancée."

"I'll marry him," Akane jerked her thumb at herself. "Hell, maybe we can even give your old man a rest and you can spar with me every morning. Wouldn't that be great?"

Genma felt a flash of anger and concern as he saw Ranma cringe at that.

"Uhm, no, I'm sorry, I really don't think that would...I mean I've got to go back and find a cure for my curse."

Nabiki exchanged a glance with Kasumi. The way the boy's father was looking at him was sufficient indication that Ranma normally didn't act like this.

"I'm sorry, Akane, but I have priority in this instance."

"Kasumi?!"

Kasumi shrugged. The look of pain and anguish on the young girl's face called out to her maternal instincts. Besides, she could always step out of the way later when she knew more about what was going on.

Nabiki caught the glance that Kasumi discreetly shot her and wiped a smirk from her face. She didn't know if she could survive Akane giving her a lesson, but Kasumi would be safe.

Akane closed her mouth. What were they doing? Why was Ranma acting like this? What had prompted Kasumi to step in? This wasn't how she had thought it would go.

"Well, I don't really care which of you marries him," Soun said with a smile. This was going even better than he had planned. "Well, Ranma, which will it be, Akane or Kasumi?"

Ranma glanced at Akane and restrained himself. He was still feeling muscle cramps from the spasming, and nausea from the amount of pain he'd endured less than an hour ago. "Uhm, Kasumi, I guess. Nothing personal, Akane."

Akane blinked and stared at her tea. He'd chosen...Kasumi?! After hundreds of years trying to get back here, Akane had lost her fiancée. He'd never even said that he'd chosen her, even up to that failed wedding attempt. He'd only said that he'd loved her when he thought she was dead. Now he'd actually chosen a fiancée, and it wasn't her?

Akane clenched her jaw. She was NOT out of the running yet.

"Hmmm... I think I see where you're going with this one, Llothy!"

Should prove, er... interesting..."

Lloth smiled sweetly. Somehow, it made her look even more dangerous. Toltiir sweatdropped.

"I'm glad you think so, kitty. I always thought that girl had potential... What a Priestess she'd have made..."

Later that evening, Genma and Ranma sat in the dojo, balanced on their heads in an upside-down lotus position. Despite the fact that he'd performed this exercise thousands of times over the last ten years, Ranma couldn't find his center. Oh, man... That Akane girl... His face contorted in a wince of remembered pain. She's so much better'n me it's scary! And that move she used- "Black Rose Torture Fist." What kind of sick, twisted person uses an attack like THAT?! In a sparring match, no less... A muscle spasm hit, and he toppled forward onto his face.

Genma growled something unintelligible at the sound, and opened his eyes.

"Ranma! What on Earth is the matter with you, boy?!" He reached out and cuffed his son across the back of the head. "How do you expect to carry on the Saotome Ryu if you can't even perform this simple an exercise?!" He rolled out of the upside-down lotus and stood before his son. "Do I have to retrain you from the beginning?!"

"Lay off, Pop. I'm not in the mood for one of your stoopid lectures. I got stuff on my mind, okay?"

Genma opened his mouth to burst into a classic rant, (one of his personal favourites, about how a true martial artist doesn't let anything distract him from the task at hand,) when he thought back to the day of his Omiai with Nodoka. A wistful smile crossed his face and he sat down again, facing his son.

"Ranma m'boy, your old father knows exactly how you feel. Why, I remember the day I met your mother for the first time... I wore black, she wore white... Truly a beautiful creature; It was love at first sight. Hey, that rhymed..." He shook his head to clear it. "Never mind that now. What I mean to say is, you made a fine choice m'boy. Tendou-kun tells me that Kasumi-chan is an excellent cook and housekeeper. And an older woman to boot! Oh, Ranma, you sly dog..." Genma smiled proudly. "What a chip off the old Saotome block you are, m'boy. You do your father proud!!!" A brief frown crossed his features before clearing. "Of course, Tendou-kun informs me that Kasumi hasn't been seriously training in the Tendou Ryu for some time, but that's no trouble. I'm sure Akane-chan will be able to teach you all you need to know about THAT..."

Genma didn't miss the brief look of anxiety that crossed Ranma's face at the mention of Akane's name.

"What's the problem, boy? I noticed you looked odd this afternoon after your match with Akane-chan. Is the Tendou Ryu that impressive? Tendou-kun said that Akane-chan was his best pupil..."

"Pop, I... Gomen, it's just hard to come out and say this... She almost killed me! And the move she used..." He shivered and whitened. "It was terrifyin'! You should'a told me the Tendous were a ninja clan!"

Genma blinked. Ninja clan? What was the boy talking about? Ranma continued.

"She had this LOOK on her face... I guess you could call it a smile, but she looked like she wanted to eat me for lunch! I ain't NEVER seen anybody fight like that, not Shampoo, not nobody! She's a killer, Pop, and she enjoys doin' it..."

This didn't make sense, Genma thought. Tendou-kun had said that Akane trained for an hour a day at MOST. Had Tendou's skill, passed on to his daughters, surpassed his own by THAT much in the last ten years? They'd been rough equals while they trained under the Master (may he rest in peace, he fervently prayed)... This bore further investigation.

Nevertheless, it was his duty as a father to upbraid his son for cowardice.

"Ranma! Your whining makes me sick! She's only a girl! Show a little backbone, boy!!"

Genma's goading words had the desired effect as Ranma flipped to his feet and slid into an aggressive fighting stance.

"Backbone?! I'll show you backbone, you stoopid old man!"

Ranma lunged at his father with a rapid series of blows. Genma parried most, but a few pierced his defenses. He returned the favour with interest as the battle moved back and forth across the dojo floor. With every blow struck, Genma taunted Ranma further, driving the boy to greater heights of exertion.

Quicker than Genma'd expected he would, Ranma gained the upper hand, and the older man was now purely on the defensive.

"How's THIS for backbone, y'old fart? Take that! N' that! Some'a this!"

Finally, a crescent kick sent Genma flying into the corner, where he landed head first in the fire bucket. In moments, a giant panda with a steel bucket jammed over his head staggered aimlessly about the room. Muffled Growf-sounds came from under the pail.

"Whassamatter, old man? Can't see where yer goin'? Aw, that's too bad..." Ranma dusted off his hands and walked up behind the blinded panda. A swift kick in the rear sent Genma flying head-first back across the room into the doorframe, crumpling the bucket and freeing him. "That enough backbone for ya, old man?"

Genma-panda growfed affirmatively, and promptly lost consciousness.

Ranma chuckled once before sighing. No, he hadn't lost it. He could still beat the old panda. His thoughts turned back to the youngest Tendou sister.

"Good thing old man Tendou gave me a choice... I'd hate to be engaged to a psycho like that..." Not that I'm scared'a her or nothin', he added mentally. Nope, not frightened in the least...

From her place of concealment, Akane watched Ranma pound the tar out of his father, a wave of nostalgia washing over her. Here was the cocky young warrior she'd fallen in love with. Even after all she'd seen and done in her centuries of life, the sight of him in battle still took her breath away.

She'd taken men to her bed several times over the years, more to ease the loneliness than anything else, but she'd never given her love to anyone but this man. And now, she thought, he hates me. Me, his One True Love...

Ranma's words echoed in her head. "She's a killer, Pop, and she enjoys doin' it." A killer? Yes, she'd killed. More times than she could count. But the 7th Age of Man was no place for luxuries like civilized morals and ethics. You did what you had to do to survive. She'd never enjoyed killing, but it was a necessary evil.

"I'd hate to be engaged to a psycho like that..." That brought back unpleasant memories; memories of their last argument, of him calling her unstable... Well, after nigh on three centuries, she was pretty certain she wasn't crazy. A little obsessed, perhaps. But the object of her obsession was right in front of her now. Mentally, she kicked herself for overplaying her hand during the sparring bout. This Ranma wasn't as tested and tempered as the one she remembered. He'd been scared instead of challenged by her superior skill in the martial arts. Despite her initial mistake, she was confident she could make a comeback, show him that she wasn't some slavering maniac. All she had to do was prove to him she was a desirable mate, and she knew just how to do THAT...

She smiled, imagining the night to come. So many nights she'd dreamed of him, of one night of passion with her Ranma. She looked forward to making the dream a reality...

Kasumi hummed to herself as she did the dishes, doing her small part to restore the "wa" of the household. She tried to bring an untroubled mind to her domestic tasks, but concern for her new iinazuke kept disrupting the ordered flow of her thoughts.

He was so... Young. Both in age and spirit. He'd seemed so small and quiet during dinner, she'd hardly known he was there. Still, the food on his plate disappeared rapidly, so he must have enjoyed her cooking. Hadn't he?

She sighed to herself. She certainly liked the boy, he seemed very nice, but... Well, he didn't need a fiancée now, she judged, he needed a Mother. She must remember to ask Saotome-san about his wife. Was she still alive, she wondered? Perhaps she should look into contacting her if that was the case. The poor boy would benefit from a little motherly love.

Love. She'd always hoped she'd marry for love, that some handsome stranger on a white horse would come, sweep her off her feet and carry her off into the sunset, just like in the romance mangas she'd read as a girl. Lately, she'd even begun to contemplate asking Father to set up an Omiai for her, just so that she might meet an eligible man. She didn't think that her standards were terribly hard to meet; all she wanted was a pleasant-looking man, who made a good living, and who would take the time to engage her in intelligent conversation once in a while. Talking with Nabiki was one thing, but she longed for more companionship than her sister could provide.

She thought for a moment. Since graduating High School, she'd been on, what? Two dates? That Kensuke lout, and that gaijin martial artist who'd stayed at the dojo for a while, Terry Bogart. Both had been unmitigated disasters. At least Terry had tried to show her a good time, but all he'd managed to do was talk about his ex non-stop. Kensuke had been far too forward for her liking, and Father had given him a thorough pounding when she'd complained about his behavior.

But, she supposed, that was all out the window now... No more dates for Kasumi Tendou. No, her future was already planned out by Father. She'd be cooking and cleaning in this house for the rest of her life...

"Hey, sis! You washed that one already..." Nabiki had entered the kitchen and leaned against the counter. Kasumi had been so lost in thought she hadn't noticed the new arrival.

"Hmm? Oh, hello Nabiki. Would you mind lending me a hand?"

"Sorry, no can-do," She held up her hands and wiggled her fingers. "Just did my nails... So, how're you holding up?"

"Oh, just fine, Imotochan, you know me..." She laughed wanly.

"Yeah, right Kasumi. Not having second thoughts about jumping on the grenade, are you?" When Kasumi didn't answer, Nabiki sighed and smiled sadly. "Look, I'm sorry about this, sis. I know I was the one who was all excited about the engagement, and I go and stick you with the guy... It's just... Well, Akane gave me the heebie-jeebies, the way she almost pounced on him. I hate to say it, but I think little sister's finally gone off the deep-end. It must be the Horde o' Hentai attacks every morning, they've driven her bananas."

Kasumi sighed and hung her head.

"Imotochan, explain to me again why you didn't step in? He seems to be more your type than mine..."

"My type? Ranma? Puh-leeze. A wandering martial artist? I want a man with pros-pects."

"And don't I deserve one too?" Kasumi snapped, a rare display of pique that caused Nabiki to step back a moment.

"Of course you do, Oneechan, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply... Look, it's only for a little while, I promise, okay? Just until I can

talk Daddy out of this whole thing. There's no way Akane's the girl for him. She scares the bejeezus out of the guy, and believe me, he's got good reason to be freaked. That move she used- Brrrrrr! No WAY Daddy taught her THAT one..."

"I understand... I wonder where she might have learned it? If it's as cruel as you say, I doubt they're teaching things like that in her self-defense classes at Furinkan."

"Nope, not unless the teacher is a raving psychotic, and last time I checked, Garuda-Sensei was steady as a rock. A little intense, maybe, but what do you expect from a gym teacher?" She gave a quick laugh. "Anyway, I promise. I'll talk to Daddy, you know he can't say no to me." She leaned over and gave her big sister a quick peck on the cheek. "I'd give you a nice hug, but these nails of mine..."

"It's all right, Nabiki. Thank you."

"No prob. And I won't even charge you!" She added with a wink.

Later that night, Ranma lay on his back on the tatami mat that Kasumi had laid out for him, staring up at the ceiling. Genma, still a panda, snored away beside him. The fact that the old man had ended up in the Spring-of-Drowned-Panda-with-a- Deviated-Septum somehow didn't surprise Ranma. It merely demonstrated the truth of Ranma's Law, an ongoing theory he'd been developing. There is no situation, no matter how dire or how banal, that cannot be made worse by a Jusenkyo curse.

His father's earlier words came back to him. An older woman... To be honest, he didn't know how he felt about that. Kasumi seemed very nice, but... Three years. That's a BIG difference. Pop said it wouldn't matter once we're both adults, but it sure mattered NOW. He didn't know where to begin when it came to striking up conversation with her. What did HE know about housekeeping, or cooking, or any other girly-stuff... He'd never even given a thought to what kind of woman he wanted to marry, but it sure wasn't a shufu... not that he had anything against Kasumi, he amended mentally. She sure is pretty, and a good cook. The Kami KNEW he hadn't eaten this well since the old days hangin' around Ucchan. I wonder what that guy's up to these days? He'd probably get a kick out of THIS fix.

One thing he DID know is that he wanted nothing to do with that crazy Akane chick. Uncute tomboys who'll torture you for kicks are NOT my thing, he thought. It'd be different if she was just better at the art than he was, but taking that kind of joy in offhanded cruelty was too much. 'Sides, he added with a shudder, she's damn creepy!

As he finished that thought and made to roll over, he heard the door slide slowly open. He glanced over, and his jaw dropped. There, standing silhouetted in the doorway, naked, was Akane!

***** END PART ONE. TO BE CONTINUED!!!!

AFTERWORD: No, this isn't turning into a lemon. Limey bits at most, but not anytime soon. (All the Hentai in the house say: Awwww....)
NEXT TIME: Akane and Kunou- together again! The Horde o' Hentai see a

whole new side of everyone's favorite Kawaiikune tomboy! And what happened to the "original" Akane? All this and more, comin' atcha soon!

2. Default Chapter Title

THE BET: A STUDY IN SCARLET (PART TWO) Original Bet entry "A Study in Scarlet" by Gregg Sharp (used with permission) Continued by Dave Menard (catthouse@lweb.net) C+C welcome, flames will be placed in the round, flushing file.

OBLIGATORY DISCLAIMER: C'mon. You and I BOTH know Takahashi owns the Ranma characters. Who's fooling anybody? Gregg created the Bet, TSR owns Lloth. Fujimi Publishing owns Hiroe Ogawa. (and a big no-prize to anyone who knows what series she's from.) I don't own nothin'.

WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR: Lloth, Demon-Queen of Spiders and Goddess of the Drow has entered into a side-bet with Toltiir, everyone's favorite Elder god of Mischief. The goal: To outdo Titania, Queen of the Elves. The changes made: Something Awful happened to Ukyou Kuonjii shortly after Ranma and Akane's aborted wedding, with the end result being that Akane was catapulted forwards in time to the Seventh Age of Man, where magic and monsters have resurfaced. Ranma, believing her dead, eventually married Ukyou, settled down and lived happily ever after.

Akane spent many, many years in the distant future, gaining incredible skill and making powerful friends and foes before eventually uncovering the means to travel backwards in time to be reunited with her One True Love. Unfortunately, she arrived too soon, and is now inhabiting the body of her sixteen year-old self on the day Ranma is introduced to the Tendous for the first time.

Her memories of her past blurry at best, she miscalculated the effect her skill would have on the youthful Ranma and he instead chose Kasumi to be his iinazuke, terrified by Akane's viciousness.

Akane, never one to give up easily, has resolved to prove her desirability to the object of her now-unrequited love.

Whew! Now that everyone's up to speed, on with the show!

'Sides, Ranma added with a shudder, she's really creepy!

As he finished his thought and made to roll over, he heard the door slide slowly open. He glanced over, and his jaw dropped.

There, standing silhouetted in the doorway, naked, was Akane! Her hair was no longer bound back by her white ribbon; instead, it hung loose over her shoulders, providing tantalizing glimpses of her petite, shapely chest. His eyes, unbidden drifted lower, only to shoot up to her eyes as soon as they'd ascertained that Akane was not, in fact, wearing panties. She raised a finger to her lips and whispered "Shhhh!"

With a choked gasp, Ranma complied, swallowing hard. He didn't know what terrified him more; the fact that a naked g-g-girl was

presenting herself in front of him, or that the girl in question was Akane Tendou! His brain, running on full code red panic alert, sent signals to the rest of his body. "Flee, you fool, flee!" it screamed, while Lil' Ranma, presented with the undeniable fact of a naked girl present in his general vicinity, shot to attention, much to the dismay of his nominal master.

Akane smiled as she saw his body's undeniable reaction. It was working! Unlike her younger self, with the perspective of age behind her she knew she was in excellent shape, tautly muscled, yet soft enough to retain sumptuous femininity. Moving with catlike stealth, she slid the door silently closed and sprang nimbly across the room to Genma's tatami, tapping a point on his exposed back. The panda's snores instantly became deeper and more sonorous.

"There," Akane breathed huskily as she looked across the darkened room at Ranma. "He won't be waking up for a good eight hours... More than enough time." She leered meaningfully at the quailing boy. Endorphins rocketed through his bloodstream, causing his leg to twitch and sharpening his senses. He was acutely aware of the smooth planes of her well-toned body, the scent of her shampoo, the sound of his own ragged breathing.

"W-what are you doin'? Ranma whispered weakly. "You crazy or somethin'?! Go away!"

"But why..?" Akane purred, slinking over to Ranma's side. "I only want to make you happy..." She breathed that last into his ear, causing his pigtail to straighten and a drop of blood to fall from his nose.

"I-if you wanna make me happy, get out!" He protested, trying not to think about what those wonderfully soft and warm objects pressing against his chest were, yet still unable to escape the memory of the agony she'd given him this afternoon. "I don't know what k- kinda game you're playin' but it ain't funny!"

"No, but it could be fun, if you'd let me..." Her hand crept under the covers, gliding down his chest to slide beneath the elastic waistband of his boxers. That was too much for Ranma's overstimulated, confused nerves to take. With a strangled sound, he pushed her away and crabcrawled back into the corner of the room.

"Get away! Stay back, you crazy bitch! HE-EELLLPP!"

"Damn it!" Akane swore as she heard the sound of running feet coming down the hall. She KNEW she should have tagged her family's Shiatsu sleepy-spots! She turned to stare Ranma in the eye, longing warring with her knowledge of her family's probable reaction to discovering their "baby sister" in flagrante delicto. "Don't worry. I'll see you tomorrow night, my love..." With a final kiss blown over her shoulder, she slid the window open and leapt nimbly out, her skin pale white in the moonlight.

The door to Ranma's room was thrown open, and Soun and Kasumi stood there, Soun with a bokken in hand and Kasumi with a cast iron skillet, worried expressions on their faces. "What is it, son? What's wrong?" Soun glanced around the room, seeing only a sleeping panda and Ranma huddled in the corner, looking as pale as his sheet. "We

heard you cry out..."

"Err..." Think fast, Saotome. You tell the truth, and they'll more'n likely blame YOU..." "I er, had a nightmare, folks. Gomen. I didn't mean to wake you..." Soun looked puzzled, then a little dismayed. Was THIS the heir to the Anything-Goes School? A little boy who jumps at shadows?

"That's... er, quite all right, son. Very well then, goodnight..."

"Goodnight, sir." Soun left, grumbling about overactive imaginations. Kasumi stayed a moment longer, looking at Ranma questioningly. Had Akane's cruel attack this afternoon frightened him that deeply? The poor boy... A surge of protective instinct washed over her.

"Ranma-kun?"

"Uh, yeah, Kasumi?"

"If you need anything, anything at all, you just let me know, all right?"

"Err, yeah, thanks." Ranma's body, still reeling from the Attack of the Naked Tomboy, couldn't help but react. He noticed, despite himself, that Kasumi's nightgown was backlit by the hallway lights, and he could easily make out some attractive curves... He turned his head away, blushing, thankful fro the sheet piled loosely in his lap. "Well, uh, G'night, Kasumi..."

"Pleasant dreams, Ranma-kun." She gave him a soft reassuring smile and closed the door. Ranma dragged himself back over to his tatami and drew the covers up over his head.

"Oh, man..." Just what he needed. Was Kasumi coming on to him? He had absolutely NO practical experience with the opposite sex, unless you counted one kiss from Shampoo. Well, he had a fairly good idea what exactly they wanted, but... He sighed, shifting his body around in a vain attempt to get comfortable. And what kind of game was Akane playing? Was she torturing him? Trying to give herself another excuse to use that... "Technique" of hers? He shivered a little, closing his eyes. Just try and sleep Saotome. Don't wanna wake the Tendous up again...

He shuddered briefly as he remembered Akane's last words to him.

"Tomorrow night?" he squeaked. "Oh, no..."

The following morning dawned bright and clear, and Ranma awoke to the delicious smell of miso soup wafting up from the kitchen. He groaned, stretched and looked around, blinking to clear the sleep from his eyes. He glanced over at the LED display on the clock radio, shrugged, froze, and looked again. Eight a.m.?! What the... The old man never let him sleep so late! "A true Martial Artist doesn't lollygag around in bed! A true Martial Artist is up at the crack of

dawn to hone his skills!!" He glanced over, and sure enough, the old panda was still snoring merrily away.

"Then it wasn't a dream..." he whispered. There really was some kind of sleep-touch, and Akane HAD been in his room last night. The little conscienceless hentai that lurks in the back of every teenage boy's mind chimed in: And she wuz nekkid! Nekkid I tells ya! Hotcha!

"Yeah, right. Like I want anything to do with a psycho tomboy like that!" The little hentai pulled a face and went back to sulking in the corner.

Ranma dressed in his black drawstring pants and pulled on his red chinese top. With a hop, he sprung out the door and descended the stairs to the dining area, where his iinazuke- (er, well, let's just keep thinking of her as Kasumi for now, shall we? his brain suggested. Safer that way.) Where _Kasumi_ was serving breakfast.

He barely managed an "Ohaiyo" before he began stuffing his face. No telling when the old man's gonna wake up- better eat up while I can. He was halfway through his fifth helping of eggs when he noticed the silence around him. Hesitantly, he looked up.

Soun, Nabiki and Kasumi sat there with varying degrees of shocked awe on their faces.

"What? Somethin' wrong?" Ranma asked. Or rather, that's what he meant to ask. What came out was a small spray of egg and the words "Mmmrphl? Mumphmmm hfflm?"

"That's, er..." Soun breathed, "That's quite a healthy appetite you've got there, son."

Kasumi and Nabiki nodded, awestruck.

"Mmorfl-" Ranma swallowed, blushing. "Sorry 'bout that."

"Well, never mind." Kasumi said cheerily. "You just help yourself." Internally, she made a note; triple the portions from now on. Nabiki rapidly recalculated the food budget, and came up with a balance in the red. The boy'd eat them out of house and home within two months unless they somehow increased their income. Maybe it was time to talk to Daddy about taking on students again...

Ranma continued to stuff his face with his hosts' blessings, oblivious to anything but the fact that here was good food, and he didn't have to fight Pop for his share.

Akane woke with a start, alarmed to find herself in unfamiliar surroundings. Where was she now?! Hob's Gate Keep? Baron's cave? No, wait, since when does Baron's cave have Hello Kitty merchandise all over the walls?

The events of the past twenty-four subjective hours came rushing back in a wash of memories. Blessed kami, she was home! She leapt out of

bed with an energy she hadn't felt in decades. Restraining herself from dancing an impromptu jig, she walked over to her vanity mirror and inspected herself. She was so... young! And her hair was really, really long! Well, that's going to change, and right quickly. That'll never fit under a helmet...

She reached for the pair of scissors and was about to start chopping wildly, when the realization fully set in. She was HOME!!!! She didn't NEED to worry about how her armour would fit! No Goblin slavers or Orcish mercenaries were going to jump out of the cupboards and make attempts on her life! She was home, and reunited with her Ranma!

That put an immediate pall over her good mood. No, she WASN'T with Ranma. Ranma, for some reason she couldn't fathom, was with Kasumi, of all people. That was something else that was going to change quickly. She smiled crookedly at herself in the mirror, the sly expression somehow out of place on her deceptively innocent features. He hadn't given in to her last night, but then again, they'd been interrupted. She'd try again tonight, and THIS time, she'd make sure that didn't happen.

Another point came to mind. It's been so very long since those (these) days... I mustn't give away too much, she thought, or else Nabiki, if no one else, will start to suspect that all is not normal with her "kid" sister. If only her memories were clearer... Didn't I use to keep a diary? Yes, that's right, I did! Where did I hide it...

After a little searching, she found the slim leatherbound volume underneath three shoeboxes in the closet. A brief perusal of the contents brought a smile to her face. "Hard to believe I was ever this childish..." Yesterday's entry caught her eye. Her eyes widened, and she began to giggle.

The Horde o' Hentai! She hadn't thought about those dimwits in ages! Wait- H.O.H. meant school. School meant classes. Classes meant studying. "Oh no! Did I have homework due?! No, wait, I was always a good little schoolgirl, I did my homework BEFORE my workout... At least, I HOPE I did..." With the revelation of the existence of homework, another realization hit.

"Oh, drakeshit! There's no WAY I can fake my way through school for the next two years! I'm doomed!" She cursed her lack of foresight in formulating her wish. She should have made sure to specify that she would not only still know what she knew now, but that she'd know what she knew THEN, too. Or was that the other way around? Time travel made her head hurt, it was far too esoteric for her. "Give me an opponent I can wrap my hands around and choke, anyday..."

Muttering imprecations in dwarven, she dressed herself in one of her school uniforms, cursing the impracticality of the outfit. Still, it was a relief to put on clothing that wasn't rough-spun cotton or linen for a change. Of all the things other than Ranma she'd missed in the Seventh Age, well-fitted clothes had been in the top ten...

Genma had finally risen and had made his way downstairs, only to find

that his worthless ingrate of a son had eaten all the breakfast. Kasumi had apologized, and produced a plateful of bamboo shoots out of thin air, but he'd been looking forward to a home-cooked meal...

After returning to human form, he happened to mention school to his son.

"School?! Aw, man!"

"Well, we ARE going to be staying for a while..."

Nabiki poked her head around the corner, already dressed in her uniform.

"Yeah, Daddy's made all the arrangements! (With my help, of course, she added silently) You'll be going to the same school as me and Akane! You'd better get a move on if you don't want to be late on your first day..."

"First day?! But... I don't have any school supplies!"

Genma produced a bookbag out of nowhere.

"Now you do. Remember, m'boy, a strong mind in a strong body is what the Anything Goes School is all about!"

"Like you're one to talk old man!"

"Ranma..." Nabiki said chidingly. "No uneducated bum's gonna marry MY sister. Get a move on, or you'll end up having to walk to school with Akane!"

"Yipes!" Ranma scooped up the bookbag and dashed to the door; Nabiki stopped him with a gesture.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Huh? What?"

"Say good-bye to your iinazuke, dummy."

"Oh..." Ranma's face turned redder than his shirt. "Right..." He walked hesitantly over to the kitchen, poking his head inside. "Uh, Kasumi..? I'm uh... I guess I'm goin' to school, now, so... Bye?" Despite himself, he couldn't help remembering what she'd looked like last night, backlit in her thin shift... He sniffled, sensing an impending nosebleed.

Kasumi turned to face him and smiled pleasantly.

"Have a good day, Ranma-kun! Here, I made you lunch..."

"Oh... Hey, great!" He brightened, one appetite overwhelming another. "Thanks a lot!" Wow. Maybe there IS a plus side to this iinazuke thing. Kasumi sure is a great cook...

"Whaddya mean, he left with Nabiki?!" Akane yelled.

"My little girl's shouting at me!! Waaahhhh!!!!" Soun collapsed into a puddle of goo before Akane's annoyed glare.

"Knock it off, Dad. You're acting like an imbecile."

"Ohhh, my baby girl thinks her father is an imbecile!! Waaahhhh!!!!"

"Oh, hel's bells. Well, I've got to go catch up. At least TRY to act like a MAN, Dad."

"WAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!"

Ranma strolled along the canal fence, easily keeping pace with Nabiki and her friend, a pretty, short-haired girl with light blue hair who'd been introduced to him as Hiroe Ogawa. Right now she was fielding questions about adjusting the odds on some fight that took place every morning, and HE was fielding curious glances.

"Um, excuse me, Saotome-san?" Hiroe asked shyly.

"Hmm? Oh, you mean ME? Geez. Just call me Ranma, okay? People say Saotome-san and I look around for my Pop."

"Okay..." She smiled, pleased. "But only if you call me Hiroe..."

"Sure, I guess..." He hopped down to walk alongside her. So, what did you want to ask, Hiroe?"

She tore her eyes away from the lines of his legs and looked up. "Oh, well, I just wanted to know... Well, uh... are you Nabiki's boyfriend?"

Ranma turned bright red.

"Uh, Nabiki? A little help here?" Nabiki looked over at the pair and smirked. Who to charge? Saotome didn't have five yen to his name, so...

"Well, Hiroe-chan, I can let you in on the full story for only 500 yen. That's half what I'm charging the rest of the class. You won't find a better deal..."

Hiroe sighed and reached into her bag. Being friends with Nabiki Tendou was an expensive proposition. She produced the money and handed it over grudgingly.

"Thank YOU... Now, here's the scoop. Saotome there is engaged to marry my sister Kasumi."

"What?"

Ranma turned several fetching shades of red, from a pleasant rose to a nice black cherry. All this attention was really... Unnerving, actually. He looked apologetically at Hiroe and shrugged.

"S'not really our idea... Our Pops' arranged the whole thing... Uh, but... I don't really KNOW anybody here in town- Do you, uh... wanna be friends?"

"Sure, Ranma... That'd be nice..." Hiroe said shyly.

"Cool... Hey, Nabiki! What's the big idea of charging my friend Hiroe here for info on MY personal life?"

"Please, Saotome. If you weren't too craven to tell her yourself... Besides, the way you and your glutton of a father eat, we're gonna need the extra cash."

"Oh." Ranma thought about that for a minute. He hadn't really considered what kind of effect his visit was having on the Tendous. "Well, maybe I can get a part-time job or somethin'. Y'know, to help out a bit?"

Nabiki's eyes widened slightly. She hadn't thought... Well, well... The boy has some sense of responsibility after all...

"Hmm, thanks for offering but... Furinkan has some pretty strict rules about students having after-school jobs. I don't think the administration'd go for it. You could maybe get work on the weekends, though. Unless you plan on taking a juku on Saturdays with me and Akane..." Ranma made a face. "Didn't think so. No offense, Saotome, but you just don't strike me as the scholarly type."

"Well, maybe if school wasn't so damn boring, I'd be a little more interested. I'd rather be workin' or trainin', if you ask me..."

"I didn't. If you're going to marry into the Tendou clan, you've got to get an education."

"So who said I wanted to-?!" He sighed. "Look, Nabiki, I'm only goin' along with this until I can figger a way out, okay? Kasumi's nice an' all, but I ain't ready to get married."

Unseen by her companions, Hiroe's eyes brightened momentarily, a smile crossing her lips.

"Saotome, I'm hurt! You don't like my family?" Nabiki said sarcastically.

"It ain't like that!! You'n Kasumi are all right, an' your Pop' an okay guy, but... Look, can we just drop it? You were sayin' somethin' about workin' weekends?"

Nabiki nodded, but she wasn't about to let the matter go. "Until I can talk some sense into Daddy, you and Kasumi are stuck with one another... Unless you'd like to switch the engagement to Akane?"

Ranma blanched, then blushed fiercely. Nabiki noted the latter reaction with interest and a little bit of surprise. Did I read him wrong? He couldn't be interested in Akane, not after what happened yesterday... Impossible. His next words confirmed that thought.

"No way! Like I'd wanna go NEAR a psycho tomboy like her!!! Ranma

realized with a start that he'd been baited. An idea occurred to him. "I'd much rather switch the engagement to YOU, Nabiki..." He said, in overly-suave tones.

Nabiki's famous reserve cracked for a second, her eyes going wide. A twinkle lit Ranma's eye as he leaned in close, and whispered: "Gotcha!"

Hiroe laughed aloud as she saw Nabiki's face redden.

"Saotome, you jerk! Don't frighten me like that!" Nabiki snarled. "And you!" She pointed at Hiroe. "Zip it!"

Ranma and Hiroe restrained their giggles... barely. Nabiki calmed down and, regaining her composure, continued in an icy tone.

"As for your potential employment, some of faculty owe me favours, I'll see what I can do about getting an exception for you based on... Oh, let's say... family poverty."

"Hey!"

"Do you and your Father have any assets you're not telling me about?"

"Uh, no..."

"Then poverty it is. Bear with me, Saotome, it'll all work out-"

Nabiki's voice trailed off as she noticed she was now talking to a busty redheaded girl. Nabiki blinked. Hiroe gasped. Ranma looked back down the street, where a little old lady with a ladle and bucket was splashing water on the sidewalk to keep the dust down.

"Terrific." Ranma said resignedly. "Well, there's nothing for it. C'mon, let's go to school."

"Are you nuts, Saotome? Daddy registered you as a guy! I know where we can get some hot water..."

Nabiki grabbed Ranma by the pigtail and began dragging her around the corner. Hiroe just stared for a moment, blinking, then hurried to catch up.

"You wait here, Ranma. I'll go get the kettle, okay?" AND take this opportunity to pay you back for that little scare... Nobody does THAT to Nabiki Tendou! "Uh, okay..." Ranma said absently, reading the signs. "Tofu Clinic... Chiropractic medicine, Moxibustion and Acupuncture." Good to know that there's a Doctor in this neighborhood, what with livin' in the same house as that psycho tomboy...

"Um, Ranma...? You ARE Ranma, right?" Hiroe had caught up at last, and was staring hard at the redhaired girl. Ranma blushed again. This was becoming a habit...

"Yeah, I'm Ranma... Sorry 'bout this. I guess if we're gonna be

friends I should explain this..."

"That would probably be a good plan."

"My Pop and me, we're martial artists. A couple'a months ago, we were in China, and I fell into a cursed spring." Hiroe cocked an eyebrow skeptically. "I know how it sounds, but it's true, okay?" Ranma said, a little defensively, her tone growing bitter. "Anyway, I got cursed to change into a girl whenever I get hit with cold water. I can change back, but I need hot water to do it. There. Still want to be friends with a freakshow exhibit?"

"Sure. Why not?" Hiroe answered easily. "I bet you're never boring..."

"Huh?"

"I think it's kinda neat. Must be a real pain going to the beach..."

Ranma blinked. She didn't mind...? A small smile broke over her face.

"I dunno about the beach, but it's a pain going to a public bath..."

Soon enough, the two girls were laughing like... well, like friends sharing a joke. Ranma never realized how much he'd missed having friends. Maybe this school thing wasn't so bad an idea, after all... They shot the breeze for a few minutes, until Nabiki re-emerged from the Clinic with a teakettle in hand, accompanied by a stern looking man in spectacles and a black gi.

"Hey, Saotome! Here's the kettle you ordered. Oh, and this is Tofu-Sensei, the family doctor. Tofu-Sensei, meet Ranma." This should be good, Nabiki thought. Oh, Ranma, you're gonna get it now...

"Hi! Nice ta meetcha, Doc!" Ranma bowed politely.

"It's... a pleasure meeting you too." Tofu said, a little tersely. Ranma was briefly puzzled, but shrugged it off. She reached out and took the kettle from Nabiki.

"So how much is this gonna cost me, huh?"

"You can owe me." Ranma nodded in thanks, not noticing Hiroe's startled expression. She poured the steaming water over her head and shivered as her body shifted into male form.

"Ta-Da! Instant guy."

"Remarkable..." Tofu breathed, interested despite himself.

"Neat!" Hiroe added, earning a grateful smile from Ranma.

"Well, thanks a lot, Doc, but we'd better get movin'. Gotta get to school." Ranma said, gathering up his bookbag.

"Not so fast young man. I'd like to speak to you a moment, if I may..."

"Uh, sure, I guess." He turned to the girls. "D'you guys wanna wait, or should I catch up?"

Nabiki opened her mouth to answer, but Hiroe beat her to the punch.

"We'll wait..." Hiroe said cheerfully, earning a dark look from Nabiki. Unlike Hiroe, SHE had a spotless attendance record to uphold... Besides, the probable carnage that would follow might put her off her lunch.

"Thanks. We won't be long, will we Doc?"

"No, no... It'll only take a moment."

Tofu sat the boy down in his examination room, and the two exchanged basic pleasantries before getting down to business.

"Ranma, I feel I must ask... What are your intentions regarding Ka-Ka-Kasumi Tendou?" His glasses almost fogged at the mention of the girl's name.

"Nabiki told you, huh?" Tofu nodded grimly. "Uhm, If you're askin' if I wanted this engagement, I'd hafta say no... Why d'you ask?"

"Just bear with me, Ranma. Please, go on." Ranma noted with a little alarm that Tofu's hands were clenched into white-knuckled fists.

"Well, she's nice an' all, but... T'be honest, I'm only goin' along with this engagement until I can figger a way to get outta it, ya know? I ain't ready to get married, to ANYbody."

"I see. So you have no feelings for her, then?"

"Like I said, she's real nice, an' pretty, but she ain't my type. Why, what, you like her or somethin'?" Ranma's eyes widened as he put two and two together. "Aw, geez, you DO. Man, I'm sorry, Doc. The engagement was my Pop an' Tendou-san's idea, not ours. Does she know you like her?"

"No. No, I don't believe she does... I can't bring myself to tell her."

"Well, shoot, Doc, ya gotta tell her... I won't stand in your way. Convincing Tendou-san; THAT might be a challenge."

Tofu nodded sadly, then smiled genially at Ranma.

"Well, I'm glad we cleared that up... now, on to more pleasant matters. Nabiki also mentioned that you were looking for some work on weekends?" Ranma nodded. "Well, I could always use an extra pair of hands around here... Sweeping up and answering the phone. I'm afraid I can't pay very much, but the position is yours if you want it..."

"Yeah..." Ranma said thoughtfully. "Yeah, that'd be great!"

"Well, then, it's settled. Come by after school and we'll discuss it further." He stood and showed Ranma to the door.

"Hey, thanks again, Doc! And, uh... sorry 'bout the whole mess."

"It's not your fault, Ranma. Be careful at school today!" Tofu gave him a comradely pat on the back, and sent him on his way.

Oh, Ono, that was beneath you, he thought to himself, but jealousy can make a man do strange things...

Akane walked quickly along the canal path, tracking her prey. He'd hopped off the fence here... Then he'd gotten soaked by the ladle-lady... She smiled, waving at the old woman before continuing on. He was travelling with two girls; doubtless Nabiki and one of her friends...

Hmm... Looks like Ranma-chan got dragged off this way. Dragged? Did somebody hurt him?! What's this way? Oh, ri-ight... Dr. Tofu's clinic! Looks like events are playing out much the way I remember them... If I hurry, I might just catch up with them...

She jogged the remaining blocks to Tofu's clinic and let herself in.

"Hello? Doctor...?" She peered around the corner. The waiting room was empty this early in the day, and the nice old widow who'd worked for Tofu before she passed away... What was her name? Mrs. Hira-something... Apparently hadn't started working yet. "Hello...?"

Something white and bony touched her shoulder. With a small start, she realized a skeleton had somehow snuck up behind her! Whirling, she lashed out with a flurry of quick strikes, powderizing the undead creature.

"Hah! Take THAT, hel-spawned monster!!"

"A-Akane...?" Akane looked up from the pile of bonedust on the floor, into the wide eyes of Tofu-sensei. "Umm... What did you do to Betty-chan?"

"Betty-chan? Who... Oh, drakeshit. I'm sorry, Tofu-sensei..." Damn! I'm wound WAY too tightly. Gotta remember, I'm home....

"That's... Quite all right, Akane. I suppose I shouldn't have startled you..." He looked down at the powdered remains of his medical skeleton and blinked once. He cleared his throat, and regained his composure, putting on the old Tofu bedside manner.

"I haven't seen you in a while... No new injuries?"

"Er... No, no... Just looking for Ranma. Is he still here?" "Ranma? I'm afraid you just missed him. Is there something I can help you

with?"

"I don't..." A scheme occurred to her. If Tofu could be persuaded to seriously press his suit for Kasumi this time, then surely she'd drop Ranma like a hot potato... Right into my waiting arms! "Er, yes, actually. You like my sister, right?"

Tofu's glasses fogged over. "Ka-ka-kasumi?!" He fell off his chair.

"Ri-ight..." Forgot about THAT... "Well, I think you should go ask her out. Sweep her off her feet."

"On a d-d-d-date?" He stood up and walked into the wall. "Akane, you're taller than I remember. Have you put on some weight?"

"Over here, Sensei..."

Tofu spun and started talking to the coat rack. "Oh, THERE you are...You've lost weight, haven't you? And done something different with your hair?"

Akane sighed. This wasn't going to work, anymore than it had in HER remembered past. Tofu never had the stones to speak to Kasumi.... Waitamminute! If it's courage he lacks, then...

She walked up behind the babbling physician and tapped a point on his back, slightly beneath his right shoulderblade. He straightened immediately.

"Huh? Why am I talking to a coat rack?" He turned, his lenses defogged, a puzzled expression on his face. "I'm sorry, Akane-chan, I get these spells sometimes... What were we discussing?"

"Oh, you were just saying how you'd love to ask my sister Kasumi out for dinner..." Akane said cautiously, watching his eyes. The lenses of his spectacles remained clear.

"I did? I was? Well, why not? It couldn't hurt to ask, could it?" He said, driving a fist into his open palm. "I'll do it!"

Akane smiled. The ol' Dwarven Courage-Under-Fire point works every time! "Well, I really have to be getting to school. Bye now!"

"Yes... Goodbye, Akane-chan..." Tofu answered distractedly as Akane let herself out. Visions of tripping the light fantastic with the lovely Kasumi at his side danced through his head.

Akane jogged up to the gates of Furinkan High, only to see Ranma, Nabiki and some other girl walk through the front doors. Before she had a chance to call out, a chorus of shouts echoed across the quad as a mob of boys dressed for various sports appeared as if out of nowhere.

"Akane's here!" Cried a Sumo wrestler.

"Akane Tendou, I love you!!" Called a hockey goalie on rollerblades.

"Stay back Akane, they all want to beat you!!!" A guy in a tennis outfit yelled. The mob stopped, and stared at him. "Yeah, well, all right, I wanna beat her too. It was merely an attempt at a clever ruse wherein I'd gain her confidence, and attack when her guard was down. You guys happy now?" The mob nodded as one, and continued their mad rush forward.

Akane smirked, and cracked her knuckles. She felt like a morning workout... *****

Just inside the front doors of the school, Ranma turned at the chorus of shouts.

"Huh? Hey, Hiroe, what's goin' on?" Hiroe glanced over his shoulder.

"Oh, that's just the Horde o' Hentai. This happens every morning..."

"Horde o' Hentai?"

"Yeah, they're all trying to beat up Akane."

"Hunh? That's crazy! I'm no fan of that tomboy nutcase, but fifty-to-one ain't fair odds!" Images of the pain he'd suffered at Akane's hands yesterday flashed through his head, alongside the image of her standing there, naked, in the moonlight. She can take care of herself just fine, he decided... Then again, maybe if I step in, she won't have a chance to put the whammy on those dumb jerks; ain't nobody deserves THAT kinda pain... "Aw, hell. I better go put a stop to this. Hold my bag, willya?" He tossed his bag to Hiroe and bolted out the door.

"Ranma! Wait!"

"Too late, Hiroe..." Nabiki deadpanned. "I guess he'll have to find out for himself..." I can't understand why Tofu didn't pound on him... Oh well. Another round with Akane might be chastisement enough...

***** Akane charged forward into the mass of assailants, mowing through the boys with disabling pressure point strikes. Every once in a while, just for variety, she struck out with a high kick or a jab, sending her opponent sprawling. She remembered this being a lot harder in the old days, but what the hell, it was fun to mix it up every once in a while...

A lot sooner than she'd figured, the attack was over. She looked up from the supine form of her last opponent to see Ranma facing her in a defensive stance, having fought through the crowd from behind to get to her.

"Ranma...?"

"Don't be gettin' any weird ideas, Akane... I ain't here ta fight you. I just wanted to make sure-"

"Ranma!" She shot through his defense like it was tissue paper; Ranma winced anticipating agony, but instead found himself looking down the barrel of a glomp!

"Thanks for coming to save me!" Akane said as she looked up at him, a joyful smile on her face. "I can take care of myself, but it's so sweet that you care!!!" She snuggled closer. This is what she'd been wishing for, all those lonely years!

"Hey!! No, I... C'mon, you crazy tomboy, everybody's lookin'!!" He wriggled, trying to escape her grip.

"I know you don't mean it when you call me names, Ranma! And I don't care who knows I love you!!!"

"Hunh?!?! What?!?!" He succeeded, with difficulty, in extracting himself from the glomp. Holding her at arm's length, he looked her straight in the eye.

"Lissen Akane. The only reason I stepped in was to make sure you didn't use that 'Torture Fist' thing on these stooges. These ain't martial artists, y'know. A move like that'd more'n likely give 'em all heart attacks or somethin'. It ain't 'cause I care about you."

Akane blinked, her smile fading slightly. "You think I'd use the Fist on losers like this? You baka, I know better than that! I only use that move on fighters who are serious threats!"

She paused a moment to let that sink in. She hoped he'd realize that she was trying to pay him a complement. He merely looked confused.

"What about these guys? Were they 'serious threats'?" He gestured around at the piles of groaning bodies. Akane was growing frustrated. Why didn't Ranma understand?!

"What, you think I'm some kind of orc or something?! All I used was a simple pressure point tactic that might finally restore blood flow to their brains. Let's just get one thing straight here, mister-"

A rooba-rooba passed through the gathered crowd. Who WAS this guy? Akane didn't even TRY to pound him... A tall figure dressed in a kendo uniform shouldered his way through the assembled gawkers and gasped angrily.

"You there! How DARE you take such liberties with the beauteous Akane Tendou!!!!"

"Shut UP, dolt! I'm talking to my fiance here!!!" Akane barked without thinking. The crowd gasped as one. Kunou turned white. Ranma's eyes bugged. As soon as she realized what she'd said, she froze, paling. Idiot! He's NOT your fiance! Not yet...

Ranma, for his part, was equally stunned, both by Akane's tirade and her statement that he was HER fiance... Fortunately, he recovered quickly.

"Who're you callin' your fiance?! I ain't your damn fiance, lady, I'm engaged to your sister! Leave me the hell alone!!"

This sent a new wave of rooba-roobas through the crowd. The new guy's engaged to Nabiki?

"No, no! Not me!! It's not me!!!" Nabiki cried out the door, panicking. "He's engaged to Kasumi!!" The kendoist's brain exploded with an audible ka-boom. He raised his bokken high, trembling in righteous wrath.

"DAMN YOU, WRETCH! Not only do you lecherously paw the beauteous Akane Tendou, but you DARE to molest her sweet sisters as well?! Thou art truly an enemy of women!! I SHALL SMITE THEE!!!" He rushed forward, swinging viciously.

Ranma and Akane dodged nimbly aside as the wooden blade passed harmlessly through the air. Ranma kicked out, tripping the kendoist and sending him sprawling.

"Just who the hell are you, buddy?"

The swordsman picked himself up off the ground with a groan. He took a moment to compose himself, brushed some dirt off his clothes, and spun, with all the dignity and bearing a man who's just been sucker-tripped onto the pavement can muster.

"It's a bit after the fact now, but... Very Well!! I am the rising young star of the High School fencing world! The undefeated captain of this school's Kendo club!! My name is spoken in whispers and cried out in fear!!! I am-"

Akane interrupted in a bored tone. "The Blue Thunder of Furinkan High, blah, blah, blah..."

He continued as if he hadn't heard her, raising his bokken overhead dramatically. "-THE BLUE THUNDER OF FURINKAN HIGH!!!!!" Lightning crashed on cue overhead. "Tatewaki Kunou, age seventeen." Ranma glanced over at Akane.

"It sounds better when HE says it..." Akane shrugged. Kunou gave a little nod.

"Yes, well, good showmanship is everything, you know. And who are YOU, cur? Let me know, so that I may have it engraved upon your tombstone!"

"Er, well, okay, here goes... I'm stayin' at the Tendou Dojo..." Kunou's eyes flashed.

"In the same house as Akane?!! DIE!!!!" He lunged at Ranma, who simply backflipped out of the way.

"Hey! I let you finish YOUR stoopid speech... I'm heir to the Saotome School of Indiscriminate Grappling..." He nimbly dogged a series of attacks by the kendoist as he formulated his response, landing squarely in front of Akane as he slid into a soft defensive stance. "I'm Ranma Saotome, and I accept your challenge!!!"

Akane sighed happily. By the Gods, he was gorgeous like this!

Back at the Tendou-ke, Genma was lurking. Soun had accompanied Kasumi on a shopping trip, leaving him alone in the house. Genma slunk up the stairs to Soun's room, looking for evidence to prove or disprove his son's allegations that his old friend and his daughters were secretly members of a Shinobi clan.

As such, he didn't notice the fact that it had started raining outside...

/ Cliffs of Athaq, Aramar, 543 7th Age_/_

Baron watched expectantly as Akane finished making her wish, waiting for the flash of magical light heralding his friend's return to her own time. She'd been a valiant companion, and he'd miss her. He resolved to wait until she had disappeared for good before leaving; a sort of last goodbye...

Akane finished her incantation, and fainted. Baron rushed to her side and picked her up gently in with his huge talons. In moments, she stirred. She sat up with a start, blinked and looked around.

Oh, that's a disappointment, Baron sent telepathically. *You worked so hard to earn that wish, too... I wonder what went wrong?*

Akane's eyes went wide and she stared up at the gigantic red-gold beast.

"Oh my God!" She screamed in Japanese. "A dragon!!!!!" *Oh dear... Please don't shout like that Akane, you know it hurts my ears...*

Akane scrambled to her feet and leapt out of Baron's cupped claws, looking around frantically.

"Where am I? What happened to the Dojo?" She said hesitantly. Baron sent a hesitant telepathic probe, but all he could pick up was panic, fear and the phrase *Don'tEatMeDon'tEatMeDon'tEatMe* running on a loop through his friend's thoughts.

Oh my...

NEXT TIME: Akane gets medieval, a certain redhead gets an admirer, and Ranma gets some! (Well, maybe...)

3. Default Chapter Title

THE BET: A STUDY IN SCARLET (PART THREE) Original Bet Entry: "A Study in Scarlet" by Gregg Sharp (used with permission) Continued by Dave Menard (catthouse@lweb.net)

OBLIGATORY DISCLAIMER:I own squat. All hail Takahashi!

WHAT'S HAPPENED: Toltiir has entered into a side-bet with a certain Spider-goddess. The rules? The usual. The goal? The usual. Here's what's goin' on.

Akane Tendou's sixteen-year-old body is currently being inhabited by a much older version of herself, due to a mis-spoken magical wish. This older Akane spent several years in a distant future where monsters and magic have re-emerged, and man no longer rules the earth. As a result, she has gained deadly fighting abilities and the mindset of a warrior woman of that time. Once in her sixteen-year-old counterpart's body, she set out to win Ranma Saotome, whom she lost in her original timeline due to the screwed up spell that landed her in the far future in the first place. Unfortunately, she made a serious miscalculation, and instead of impressing Ranma with her skill, she scared the bejeezus out of him by using the Black Rose Torture Fist, a move she learned in the future which causes excruciating, mind-searing pain but does no physical damage. As a result, this time around, Ranma opted for the gentle Kasumi as his iinazuke, making the best of a bad situation.

Akane resolved to win him back, this time with affection, and attempted to seduce him that night in his bedroom. Before she could get very far, however, they were interrupted, but Akane promised (threatened?) to return the following night to finish the job. Ranma, needless to say, was more than a little freaked.

Accompanying Nabiki on the walk to Furinkan for his first day of school, he met Hiroe Ogawa, one of Nabiki's friends, and the two found that they get along famously. Hiroe isn't even freaked by his aquatranssexualism. He also met Dr. Tofu for the first time, and the two came to an understanding vis- a-vis Kasumi. If Kasumi agrees to date Tofu, Ranma will cheerfully step aside.

Warrior-Akane, anxious to remove Kasumi as an obstacle to her destined union with Ranma, has tagged Tofu with the Dwarven-Courage-Under-Fire touch, allowing him to deal with Kasumi without falling victim to the sillies.

While disposing of the Horde 'o Hentai at school that morning, Akane found herself face-to-face with Ranma, who had stepped in to ensure no one was seriously hurt. Mistaking his efforts for an attempt to rescue her, Akane glomps him in front of the entire school, thus drawing Kunou's wrath down upon Ranma's head.

Meanwhile, in the distant future, the mind of the sixteen-year-old Akane has come to rest in the body of Warrior-Akane, and is currently face-to-face with a dragon.

And now, here we go again.....

"So, Saotome, you wouldst do battle with the Blue Thunder?! Very well, then. Have at thee!!!"

Kunou charged Ranma, his bokken high. Ranma maintained his position right up until the last second, stepping aside as Kunou fell victim to the Unicorn Trap, embedding his blade in the stone wall. Ranma rebounded off a nearby tree and hung nearly horizontal for a moment,

as Kunou freed his bokken. Neither combatant noticed the storm clouds gathering overhead.

Akane, however, noted them with a groan.

"Ranma! Look up!!"

Ranma glanced upwards for a second, almost absently leaping over Kunou's slice as he noted the clouds. He looked back at Akane with a scowl.

"Don't do me no favours! You oughta know to stay outta a man-to-man fight!!!"

"But, the curse..."

"Screw the curse!" He yelled to her as he sprung off Kunou's head and onto the ground. "I'll finish this jerk off before the rain hits!"

"Damn you! Abusing the fair Akane! Oh, lecherous dog, you shall pay for your perfidy!!!" Kunou raged, lashing out with his blade. Ranma leapt high into the air as lightning crashed behind him. Hurtling back down towards his opponent, he felt the first few drops of cool water strike his back.

Kunou stared up into the rain, bokken at the ready, his eyes still seeing spots from the flash of lightning.

Simultaneously, both fighters attacked, Ranma with one outstretched arm, Kuno with his blade. The rain hit with the full fury of a spring downpour, washing across the quad like a curtain. Ranma felt his body transforming, becoming smaller, more compact. Damn! He thought. Not now...!

Kunou squinted his eyes against the rain as he thrust his bokken upwards, intending to deliver a vicious strike to Saotome's windpipe. Was it just his imagination, or did Saotome seem... Smaller? Confused, his strike went wide, grazing Ranma's neck instead of separating his head from his neck. He only had a moment to consider the mystery before he was knocked off his feet by Ranma's blow.

He slid a good six feet backward on the rain-slicked pavement, coming to rest at the foot of the concrete wall. Before he passed out from the pain, he got a good long look at his opponent. Saotome... Was a girl?

"Oh my! I knew we should have brought an umbrella, Father..." Kasumi said as she and Soun dashed under the protection of the small awning of the market. A thought occurred to her as she looked out at the sudden downpour. "Goodness! I certainly hope Ranma made it to school before the storm hit..."

"Now, now dear," Soun said soothingly. "I'm sure he's class by now, it's already after nine-thirty." He smiled indulgently at his oldest daughter. Excellent, he thought. She seemed quite taken with the young man. And even if this was nothing more than Kasumi's usual solicitude, there was always Akane. She'd expressed a considerable

interest in young Saotome. Soun's heart swelled with pride as he considered his good fortune. It looked like the schools would be united at last!!!

With more than a little difficulty, he restrained his urge to break out in tears of joy. How he'd waited for this day!

Kasumi didn't miss the all too obvious emotions crossing her father's face, and sighed softly.

"Father..?"

"Yes my dear?"

"Has... Has Nabiki talked to you yet about the engagement?"

"Hmm? No, she hasn't mentioned it to me..." Soun's mind raced. Could he possibly be THIS blessed? "You mean, Nabiki is interested in the boy as well? Oh, happy day!!"

"Oh! No, Father, that's not what I meant..." Soun looked a little crestfallen, but recovered quickly. Oh well, he thought. Two out of three's not so bad... Kasumi continued, while she could still screw up her courage.

"What I meant was... Father, I don't think this engagement is a very good idea..."

"Nonsense, my dear. Saotome-kun and I have agreed. The two schools MUST be united." He nodded resolutely. "On this, we are immovable."

"But Father, I..."

"No buts, Kasumi." Soun looked at her sternly for a moment. "If it's simply the fact that you aren't fond of the boy, Akane is more than willing to shoulder the burden."

"No!" Kasumi said, a little too quickly. Soun cocked an eyebrow consideringly. "Er, that is, Father, isn't there some other way the schools could be united? Maybe... Maybe you could teach Ranma the Tendou Ryu? Wouldn't that make him the heir to BOTH schools?" Soun tut-tutted indulgently.

"I'm afraid that's impossible. For one thing, Akane is already my designated heir. To take that away from her would break her heart... But first and foremost, the true secrets of the Tendou School of Indiscriminate Grappling must only be taught to those of the Tendou clan. To give them to Ranma would dishonour our ancestors terribly. The children of this marriage, however, will inherit BOTH schools. Such is my fondest wish..." He looked off into the distance wistfully, striking a melodramatic pose.

"Couldn't you simply adopt Ranma into the family registry?" Soun shook his head.

"Saotome-kun would never stand for it. He has but one son to carry on the Saotome clan name, after all. Besides, why go through all that paperwork when a marriage would solve the problem simply? No, my dear, the marriage must take place. Just leave it all up to your

father, and don't let it trouble your pretty little head."

Kasumi hung her head sadly. Father always patronized her like this. Sometimes, Kasumi wished she had the courage to stand up to the man, like her sisters did. Unlike Akane and Nabiki however, Kasumi was too vulnerable to her Father's secret weapon: guilt.

Soun, she knew from long experience, wielded guilt like a samurai wields a katana; skilfully, precisely, and effectively. When things didn't go his way, or one of his daughters grew angry with his sometimes-unreasonable demands, he turned on the waterworks. Even her late mother had succumbed to it, Kasumi remembered.

When tears failed to motivate others to see things his way, Soun would simply become angry, using his fearsome Demon-Head Technique to cow the victim into submission. To his credit, he'd never used that kind of intimidation with his daughters, but Kasumi, at least, lived in fear of upsetting the man.

She'd been startled to discover that she had wanted to cheer when Akane had told him off that morning. He'd wept and wailed, but Akane had simply told him to grow up and act like a man. The comment had been surprisingly out of character for the girl, but it needed to be said by someone. Soun had been so taken aback he'd merely continued wailing, but Kasumi could tell he was startled. Akane, she knew, was his favorite, his baby, just as Kasumi had been their mother's. She was usually so accommodating to him, and the recent engagement fiasco had been no different. Akane had leapt at the chance to marry the boy, whether he was willing or not...

Perhaps it might be all for the best, she thought, to simply let Akane have him. She WAS the heir to the school, as Father had pointed out... No, that wouldn't be fair to Ranma. He was terrified of the youngest Tendou.

Kasumi, for the life of her, couldn't figure out what had possessed Akane to attack Ranma like that. It certainly wasn't like her to be that cruel. Then again, she'd mentioned that she'd recently been having trouble with the boys at school. Maybe... No, Ranma had been a girl at the time, so misplaced rage wasn't the answer...

It was time, she thought, that she, Ranma and Akane sat down for a talk. Perhaps if they could understand Akane's actions, Kasumi might be willing to step aside, secure in the knowledge that Ranma would be safe. She wondered for a moment why she felt so protective towards him. They were no more than strangers, really. Something about the boy, though, made her want to take care of him. Some kind of motherly impulse, perhaps? Yes, she assured herself. That was the case. He was simply too young to consider as a romantic prospect...

The assembled students stood in stunned surprise. Before their very eyes, that new kid, the one who'd taken out everyone's least favorite kendoist, had transformed into a girl!

Hiroe, heedless of the driving rain, ran out the door to her new friend, Nabiki quick on her heels. Akane merely stood there stunned. This wasn't happening at all the way she remembered. Dammit! She'd

very clearly specified MINIMAL disruption to the time-stream when formulating her wish!! Ranma grew pale as she realized that her secret had been revealed, in front of the whole school! What a way to start the first semester...

Both Akane and Hiroe rushed forward to comfort her, but Hiroe got there first, earning a withering glare from Akane. Nabiki and Ranma took note of it with alarm.

"Ranma? Oh, no..." Hiroe breathed, stepping forward to hug her in sympathy. Ranma stepped aside apologetically, pointing out Akane's flaring battle-aurea with a gesture of his head. Hiroe gasped, stepping back. Nabiki stepped between the two girls, swallowing hard. Akane wouldn't hurt her own sister, she fervently prayed.

Akane made to lunge forward at Hiroe, Nabiki be damned, when she saw her sister cringe in fearful anticipation of the blow. She froze, her eyes growing wide. In that split second of hesitation, Ranma shot between the two Tendous.

"Akane, don't you even goddamn DARE!"

"Ranma..?" Akane said, stunned. Ranma was looking at her with an expression of hatred, mixed with a healthy dose of fear. Ranma HATED her?

"I can't believe you!! You'd hit your own SISTER?! What kind of a monster ARE you?!"

"Ranma, I-"

"Shut the hell up! I ain't gonna say this again! You lay one finger on my friends, and I'll kill you!! It's that simple..." Ranma knew her words were empty threats. Akane was so much better than her it was terrifying, but she swore she wouldn't sell her life cheaply. At the very least, she hoped Hiroe and Nabiki would be able to get away...

Akane didn't move a muscle, her fist still poised to strike as she stared Ranma in the eye. Her instinct was to simply throw her punch, deal with the fool who dared stand between her and her target; With difficulty, she tried to suppress years of ingrained survival instincts, forcing herself to calm down, see things as they truly were. She gazed deep into the eyes of the person she loved more than anything in all creation, and all she saw looking back was loathing...

Thunder rumbled overhead as the rain lessened somewhat. The entire school held their breath in awful anticipation. Ranma had shouted her challenge loud enough that it had echoed across the quad. Akane's fist began to tremble, then fell to her side, unclenching. The crowd released a collective sigh of breath, and Ranma's heart began to beat once again. Akane hung her head and spun on her heels, walking slowly out the gates and away. In the rain, no one noticed the tears that ran down her cheeks...

Nabiki and Hiroe opened their eyes slowly, blinking. They... Weren't dead? Ranma-chan turned to face them, letting out a long, ragged breath. With a muffled sob, the Nabiki and Hiroe embraced her tightly.

"My god, Ranma..." Nabiki choked out. "She was really going to hit me!" Hiroe sniffled softly in assent.

"And you saved us... You were so brave..."

Not really, Ranma thought. I almost lost control of my bladder... Aloud, she merely shhhhed them and made comforting noises before answering raggedly.

"H-hey, defendin' the helpless is a martial artist's duty... That's what Pop always told me... I'm just glad she's gone."

The crowd behind them broke up, wandering in to classes as the bell rang. Some of the Hordesmen managed to pick themselves up, groaning and limping, to stagger to their classes.

They broke their hug, Ranma pulling away first, a light blush tinting her cheeks. Nabiki, with practiced ease, was the first to regain her cool composure.

"Well Saotome, you've gotten yourself into a fine fix now. Look at yourself."

"Huh?" "She's right, Ranma. The whole school saw you turn girly back there." Hiroe said, handing Ranma her schoolbag.

"Aw, MAN!" Ranma cursed. "What'm I gonna do?"

Nabiki placed a comforting hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "Damage Control time. There's two ways we can go here. The Big Lie technique, where we simply deny it happened, and wait for the rumors to die down, or else you can just come clean and let the chips fall where they may... It's all up to you, Ranma-baby."

Ranma sighed and thought about the problem for a moment. She'd had enough troubles already today... Not to mention the fact that she was probably toast the moment she let her guard down around Akane... It might be nice to be able to relax SOMETIME, even if it was school...

"I'm gonna 'fess up. Heck, Hiroe here took things pretty well, why shouldn't everybody else? At least I won't have to hide alla time..."

Just then, the delayed reaction Shiatsu touch Tofu had discreetly tagged Ranma with as he left the clinic took effect. Ranma lost feeling from the waist down and collapsed to the ground. "What the... Hey! My legs!" Hiroe and Nabiki rushed over to help her regain her feet, but the lower half of her body was jellified. "Tofu must've done somethin'... when he patted me on the back... Guess he must be a little more p,o'd at me than he let on..." Nabiki looked a little embarrassed and coughed into her hand.

"Sorry.."

"What? What for?"

"I kinda told Dr. Tofu about your engagement to Kasumi."

"Yeah, he mentioned that. No biggie. Why'r you apologizin'?"

"I kinda figured he might, well... kick your butt or something." Ranma looked puzzled. "Well, you made me look a little foolish, when you pulled your little prank about switching the engagement to me..." Her cheeks colored a little. "Well, I'm just... sorry, okay? Can we drop it now?"

"Hunh." Ranma scratched the back of her head. "Well, it didn't happen during the fight, so I suppose there's no harm done... Guess I should apologize for freakin' you out like that. I didn't mean nothin' by it, y'understand..." she smiled apologetically up at Nabiki. "So, uh... who's gonna gimme a piggyback to class?"

Kunou slipped in and out of consciousness as he lay on the bed in the nurse's office, the morning battle replaying itself over and over in his head.

Saotome... had bested him. It was inconceivable, but it was true. How was this possible? Was he not the rising young star of the high school fencing world? Was he not the Blue Thunder of Furinkan High? Was he not the invincible Tatewaki Kunou? Yes, he was all of these things and more! Yet, this... this girl in boy's clothing had defeated him!

And what a girl she was! Scarlet tresses, as red as the freshest rose... Big, beautifully round... Eyes...

He thought back to the week before the "Voice of Youth" Speech contest. He'd been labouring long and hard on an excellent dissertation on the merits of maintaining the class system, when he'd briefly paused in his efforts, distracted by a programme showing on the television. A most excellent documentary programme on the quaint customs of the noble savages who lived deep in the heart of China's Bayankala Mountain Range. He'd glossed over the segment on the painted tribesmen who called themselves The Musk Dynasty. Phaugh! To think that such fur-clad barbarians thought themselves worthy of such a grandiose title as "Dynasty". He could only assume the name "Musk" was derived from their no-doubt nonexistent bathing habits... The segment that followed the commercial break, however, caught his eye.

The segment detailed the marriage customs of a matriarchal warrior tribe called the Nyanichiczu, whom the Japanese interviewer had dubbed "Chinese Amazons", due to their culture's resemblance to that of the mythical Amazons of ancient Greece. From what he'd gathered, these Amazons, stout warriors all, would only submit to being wooed by men who had defeated them in personal combat. The idea struck a chord in him.

After all, was he not smitten of the fair, beauteous Akane Tendou? Did she not deserve a man whose prowess exceeded her own, much as these exotic warrior women did?

He'd torn up his speech on the virtues of the class system that instant, and began work on new speech, one that would stir the hearts and minds of his fellow men of Furinkan...

"If you wish to take Akane out...DEFEAT her! I will permit no other terms!!"

It was short, and to the point, but effective. The noble men of Furinkan had rallied to his battle cry. Of course, since none amongst them was the equal of Tatewaki Kunou, he had made the challenge in perfect safety. Surely none but he were skilled enough to win the heart of his fair Japanese Amazon. He knew, deep in his heart of hearts, that she approved of his actions. He knew beyond the faintest shadow of a fragment of an atom of a doubt, that Akane was cheering him on, exhorting him to greater heights of prowess, so that she might know for certain that he was worthy of her love. He had vowed, on the Kunou honour blade, that she would not be disappointed.

And yet, this fair wildflower who called herself Ranma Saotome had accepted his challenge. She had beaten him, and fairly, for he had been fighting at the height of his prowess, thinking that she had been a man.

He decided, upon reflection, that the fair Ranma Saotome must herself be a Chinese Amazon. It explained so much; her Chinese clothes, her fighting prowess, her exotic hair coloration... (He had noticed that the Nyanichiczu women had hair in all the colors of the rainbow.) She had heard of his skill and fame and manly beauty, and had travelled to the Home Islands for the sole purpose of challenging the Blue Thunder, so that he might claim the fair flower of China as his rightful bride...

Tears came to his eyes as he realized how he must have failed her... To travel so very far, to have shamed herself by disguising her fair features beneath that disguise, only to see her true love prove himself unworthy of matrimony... He MUST see her again, if only to convince her of the rightness of her belief! The Blue Thunder would not disappoint her again!!

And yet, what of the lovely Akane Tendou? Would she not be crushed to see her beloved Tatewaki in the arms of another woman? He could not bear to think of causing such heartache to his warrior-maiden. And yet...

Did not the documentary, oh, that most excellent documentary describe how the Nyanichiczu maidens would enter into polygamous unions, so that those few great men (such as himself) that were worthy of them might father as many children as possible to the tribe? An image of his two loves, coming together to his bed, entered his mind. Oh, such bliss! And surely they would understand that his love for then both would never allow him to forsake one for the other!

Kunou's heart soared at the revelation. Oh, his Amazon Goddesses! He MUST have them both!!!

"Well class, we have a new student in our class today..." Yamanaka-sensei intoned stentoriously. "His-" He glanced over at the girl in the front row desk whom he was supposed to be introducing. Tsk. The idiots in admissions screwed up again, he thought. "HER name is Ranma Saotome, and it says here that he- er, she just got back from a trip to China, so let's give her a nice warm 'Nihao' welcome,

shall we?" He nodded over at the redhead. "Tell us a little about yourself, young lady."

Ranma twisted around in her seat as best she could to face the rest of the class. Without exception, they were staring at her with intense curiosity, especially two guys in the back, who looked like they were posed to take notes. "Heh... Well, first off I'd like to apologize for not standin' to say hi, but I got this little... er, sports injury right now... Anyway, like the sensei said, I'm Ranma Saotome. I'm a martial artist, like my dad, and we're stayin' with Nabiki Tendou's family at their Training Hall. Some of you might'a seen or heard some funny stuff about me..."

The class nodded in unison. Ranma sweatdropped.

"Uh, yeah... Well, I guess the easiest thing to do would be to show you... Yamanaka-Sensei, can you hand me that teakettle I brought? I can't reach..." The teacher handed over the steaming kettle with a nod. Furinkan's gossip grapevine reached into the teacher's lounge as well, and he had his own questions about the transfer student. "Thanks. Er, well, here goes..."

Ranma upended the kettle over her head, dousing herself in the hot water. A gasp passed through the class as her body reshaped itself, growing taller. Her hair darkened to black, and her baggy clothes filled out in an unmistakably male fashion. "Y'see, I'm really a guy..."

Homeroom 1-F performed a facefault en-masse.

Once everyone (including a startled Yamanaka-Sensei) had regained their upright positions, Ranma continued, explaining the curses of Jusenkyo. The class listened in rapt attention, all except for the two goony-looking guys in the back.

"Hiroshi, we gotta get to know this guy," whispered the one on the left, His friend nodded solemnly.

"You're right Daisuke. Imagine, being seen in public with that incredible hot girl..."

Ranma concluded his story with an apologetic shrug. Yamanaka-Sensei indulgently let them whisper amongst themselves for a few moments as he digested the boy/girl's tale. Of course, all that talk of magic pools was utter nonsense, he thought. and yet, the child HAD transformed before his eyes... He shook his head, determined to regain his equilibrium by focusing on the mundane. He cleared his throat to restore order to the class.

"Well, Saotome, that's certainly an interesting story. It does NOT, however, excuse your tardiness this morning. Since you are presently incapable of standing in the hall, I'm afraid I must ask you to go speak to Vice-Principal Masukaza about your lateness. Now, I require two volunteers to assist Mr. Saotome to the office. Anyone..?"

Hiroshi and Daisuke shot up their hands, earning a surprised look from Yamanaka. Those two NEVER volunteered for anything... Well, well...

"Very well. Tanaka, Sumisu, take Saotome to the office. As for the rest of you, please turn to chapter three in your textbook. We will begin with the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate....

/ Aramar, The 7th Age_/_

Baron took to the air with a titanic downthrust of his wings, his small charge held as gently as dragonly possible in his right forepaw. Despite his care, she let out a small yelp of terror as the great lizard launched himself off the cliffs and into space.

Now, now, Akane, The dragon sent telepathically. *Don't worry. I flew with your counterpart thousands of times, and I never dropped her once...*

"Why can't we just walk? I don't mind the delay..."

I'm afraid that's unadvisable, Akane. You, er, your counterpart has many enemies. I can best protect you in the air, where I am in my element.

"Well, I don't suppose she has many friends! Honestly! Stealing my LIFE!!"

Er, well, she didn't really mean to, my dear. I think it was more of an accident...

"I don't CARE! I want my life back and I want my body back! Who CARES about this stupid BOY she had the hots for! OOOoooooh!"

She IS you, you know. Surely you can empathize a little...

"Hhmmph!"

Well, maybe the Western Magus will be able to return both of you to your rightful places. He IS quite powerful.

"I sure hope so... "

*So do I, young lady. I only hope the price for his assistance will not be too high..."

END PART THREE

Next time: More fun at Furinkan, Akane and Kasumi have a little "talk", and more weirdness in the 7th Age!

C+C is always appreciated! Send questions and criticisms to catthouse@lweb.net

THE BET: A STUDY IN SCARLET PART FOUR Original Bet Entry "A Study In Scarlet" by Gregg Sharp Continued (with permission) by Dave Menard (catthouse@lweb.net) Earlier chapters can be found at the Ranma fanfiction archives at www.tass.org and www.fanfiction.net, or mail me and I'll send 'em to you.

OBLIGATORY DISCLAIMER: I made them all up! I did! They're all mine! Moo-hoo ha-ha!!!!

WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON?: Toltiir has entered into a side-bet with a certain Spider-goddess. The rules? The usual. The goal? The usual. Here's the score so far:.

Akane's mind has switched places with that of a much older counterpart of herself, who spent many, many years in a far- future environment called Aramar where swords and sorcery have replaced technology. This Akane lost her Ranma years ago due to a mis-spoken wish spell, and devoted her life to getting him back. However, since the spell that sent her home dropped her into her younger counterpart's body on the day Ranma first came to the Tendou Dojo, things haven't worked out like she'd hoped. Meanwhile the mind of sixteen year-old Akane Tendou has been thrust into the body of her older self, and has a whole NEW set of problems to deal with...

On the romance front, Ranma is now engaged to Kasumi, and seems to have piqued the interest of Nabiki and her friend Hiroe.

Despite her less-than ideal situation, Warrior-Akane is trying to win Ranma's heart, but her methodology is far removed from that of her younger self, and it's not going well. Ranma is freaked out by the "psycho tomboy" who used a terrifying pressure-point strike against him on their first meeting, and wants nothing to do with her.

To make things worse for poor Ranma, Kunou has witnessed the Jusenkyou curse in action and is convinced that Ranma is in fact a Chinese Amazon who has come to challenge him for his hand in marriage. To Kunou's lights, this is a GOOD thing...

WE NOW RETURN YOU TO YOUR REGULARLY SCHEDULED FIC.

Ranma hobbled down the hallway with the assistance of Hiroshi and Daisuke, feeling slowly returning to his legs.

"Er, I gotta thank you guys for helpin' me out like this. I feel like such a dork..."

Hiroshi smiled jovially.

"S'no problem, Saotome! Isn't that right Daisuke?"

"Yeah, yeah! No prob!" He glanced meaningfully at Hiroshi, who nodded in return.

"Hey, you guys wouldn't happen to know why the heck those guys were attacking Akane, wouldja? Not that I partic'larly care 'bout what happens to that psycho tomboy, y'understand..."

Daisuke and Hiroshi exchanged glances. Psycho tomboy?

"I guess you wouldn't have heard about it yet, Saotome..." Daisuke said. "Kunou said that if anyone wanted to take Akane out on a date, they had to beat her fair 'n square in combat."

"He calls fifty-to-one odds fair? Geez..." Ranma muttered. "So what is he, Akane's boyfriend of somethin'?"

"Yeah, he WISHES!" Hiroshi laughed. "Hell, _I_ wish I was her boyfriend. She is so-o hot..."

"Well, she's cute enough, I guess..." Ranma said contemplatively. "But she ain't right in the head, know what I mean? Didja see the way she went after Nabiki and Hiroe? The girl's a nutburger. Either that or she's just plain mean."

"Akane? She's about the nicest person I've ever met..." Daisuke protested. "She's even nice to us, and we're... Well, we're not geeks, are we, Hiroshi?"

"Naw. We're iconoclasts."

"Ri-ight. Anyway, she's a sweetie."

Hiroshi agreed. "Yeah, unless you try to attack her, like the hordesmen. Then it's 'POW-BANG-KABOOM!'"

"Nice?!" Ranma blurted. "We talkin' about the same Tendou Akane?"

Daisuke nodded. "Hey, maybe you just push her buttons, Saotome..." Ranma flashed back to the previous evening, when he'd received a late night visitor in his room. Push her buttons? SHE wishes...

"Say, Saotome..." Daisuke ventured.

"Yeah?"

"You're, uh, kinda heavy. Would you mind, uh... "

"Mind what?"

"Maybe, er... Changing back into a girl?"

"No way! I just got back to normal!"

"Aw, c'mon! Your girl-form is so inCREDIBLY-"

"Light! He means your girl-form is incredibly light, right Daisuke?!" He cuffed his partner upside the head.

"Huh?" Daisuke said, confused. "Oh, RI-IGHT. Yeah. Really... light."

Ranma blinked, thinking it over. These guys ARE kinda weedy-lookin'. And I AM sorta dead weight right now... He noticed with a little alarm the fact that the two boys were gleefully wringing their hands in anticipation. On second thought..

"Naw, I don't think so guys. I'd hafta change back before we get to the vice-principal's office anyway..."

He noted the look of disappointment that crossed their faces. Yep. Mental note to self: spend as little time around these two in girl-form as possible. No sense encouraging 'em to think of him as a chick...

Akane walked slowly along the bank of the canal, staring at her reflection in the glassy waters. For a second, it seemed, the reflected image of a young girl wavered, to be replaced with the hard figure of a grown woman, tarnished steel armour glinting weakly in the sunlight.

She missed that face, that body... She'd grown accustomed to it over the centuries, and it had served her well, keeping her alive in an alien world where she was virtually unique, an atavism, a walking fossil of a vanished species. She had no idea how she'd managed to stay alive so long, let alone never aging physically past twenty-five or so. She assumed it had to do somehow with the fact that she was a woman out of time. Even Baron, wise as he was, had had no clue...

She'd been a warrior there, she'd built herself no small amount of fame due to her exploits; The Ardrow had known her as the Pale Lady, the Goblindkind had feared her as the Scarlet Maiden. She'd run beneath the moon with the Wolfen packs and been a HuntSister of the Rakasta clans. Sometimes a heroine, other times a villainess, but one thing, she'd known, had remained constant.

She was Akane, and Akane was once, long, long ago, iinazuke to the bravest, most noble man she'd ever known.

Ranma Saotome. The memory of him had been what sustained her through the long, dark years as first a prisoner then a disciple of the Black Rose Assassins. For years, even decades, they'd tried to break her, reshape her into their image. After a time, she'd simply given in, performed her duties, made the sacrifices demanded, all the while holding on to Ranma; he gave her hope through the night, allowed her to retain a small scrap of herself amidst the evil all around her. The Black Rose hadn't managed to kill her soulself, the one thing that she knew made her Akane.

For after you peeled away all the layers of her self, in her heart was the knowledge that she was special, she was someone, she was The One Ranma Loved.

Only, that wasn't right anymore, was it? The Black Rose HAD crushed her spirit, after all. They'd reached back across the millennia, across time, across space, and they'd killed her, the instant she'd used their Fist on the joyful, confident boy who had claimed her heart. In that one horrible moment of faulty judgement, the prideful strike of a foolish old woman, she'd died, irrevocably, and there was no coming back...

A tear slid down her cheek and struck the glassy surface of the waters, shattering the image of the woman warrior-born, leaving only

the face of a young girl, crying for the loss of a love she feared she'd never know again...

"Gaah!" She spat, shaking her head. "What's gotten into me? I'm mooning and moping like some giddy schoolgirl! Of, course, I am a schoolgirl, but really..." Angst ridden introspection was getting her nowhere. If she wanted Ranma, action had to be taken! Yet, how to do it? The timeline seemed far different than the past she remembered. Perhaps, she was still coming on too strong? Yes, that was probably it. She didn't want to come off looking like some Chinese bimbo, now did she?

With a sigh, she resigned herself to abandoning her plan to seduce Ranma tonight in his bed. That was something the bimbo would have tried, and it had never done her any good. There has to be another way...

"Hel's Bells! Why can't I stop crying?!? Stupid pubescent hormones..."

Nabiki opened her textbook, following the teacher's instructions by rote. She hated first period. English was a perverse language, she'd decided, too many exceptions to too many rules. Language of international business or no, she loathed it.

She glanced across the aisle at Hiroe. Such a schoolgirl... There she was, reading aloud from the text like a good little student. Nabiki sighed and began to read as well, the nonsense syllables tripping off her tongue with difficulty. She was still more than a little shaken up by Akane's behavior this morning; it was so unlike her it was scary. Akane had always been the more aggressive of the three Tendou sisters, but she hadn't lashed out at any of her family since she was very young, before Mom died...

The recitation (and musing) was cut mercifully short by the arrival of Kunou in uniform. he presented a note from the nurse to the scowling teacher and took his seat amidst quiet titters from the class.

Nabiki spared him a quick glance as he took his usual seat behind her. A smirk, quickly stifled, crossed her lips. Ah, Kunou. The numbskull owed her big time. She'd had to refund a lot of betting slips when he left Akane alone for a change and went after Ranma instead. Time to break out the verbal thumbscrews...

She turned to face him and opened her mouth to speak, only to let her jaw drop in astonishment.

"Why dost thou stare at mine august visage, Nabiki Tendou?"

Nabiki wordlessly produced her compact and held the mirror to Kunou's face. His eyes widened. A wordless, strangled gargle escaped his lips as he took in the phrase "baka" imprinted on his forehead in sloppy kanji.

"Looks like Ranma-baby gotcha good, Kunou."

Kunou stood up, striking a pose.

"Oh woe! Oh misery! My beloved Amazon Goddess scorns me! I must convince her of my worthiness..."

A blackboard eraser stuck him between the eyes, snapping him out of his dramatic monologue. A matching one bounced off Nabiki's shoulder.

"Kunou! Tendou! Go stand in the hall!"

Thus it came to pass that Nabiki found herself, for the first time in her scholastic career, on bucket duty. To make matters worse, she was stuck listening to Kunou rant. After five breathless minutes he turned to face his partner in punishment, eyes wild.

"Nabiki Tendou, you seemed most familiar with my beloved Ranma Saotome... Tell me, how may I prove my worthiness?"

Nabiki blinked once. Beloved Ranma? This is unexpected...

"Wow, Kunou, I had no idea you were gay..."

"Pish-posh! The Blue Thunder is no lover of men, Nabiki Tendou." Kunou said dismissively. "Surely a woman possessed of your low animal cunning was not fooled by the lovely Ranma's paltry disguise? She is a woman! A woman most fair!"

Low animal cunning?! Nabiki thought incredulously. You PRICK! See if you ever get another discount rate on Akane photos, you arrogant buffoon!

"I assure you Kunou," Nabiki stated icily. "Ranma is a guy."

Her cold, dismissive tone went unnoticed by the besotted kendoist. "Stuff and nonsense, Nabiki Tendou. She is a fair flower of China, here to gauge the worthiness of the Blue Thunder."

"China? Where do you GET this stuff, Kunou?"

His reply died on his lips as a trio of figures rounded the corner. Hiroshi and Daisuke, two losers from Akane's class, seemed to be carrying Ranma between them. Kunou immediately charged the three boys like a french skunk, arms outstretched, a bucket of water still splooshing merrily away in each hand.

"Ranma Saotome! I would date with you!!!!"

Ranma looked up with a horrified expression. Hiroshi and Daisuke started, almost dropping Ranma to the floor at the sight of the love-crazed fool rushing towards them.

"Huh? What are you TALKIN' about, you fruitcake?! I ain't like that!" Kunou showed no signs of slowing. Ranma looked around, seeking a means of defense. He essayed his legs, but they were still too weak to support him. Stymied, he realized he'd have to rely on the Saotome Secret Technique, and yelled at his companions, "Run, you fools!"

Hiroshi and Daisuke complied, dragging the terrified Ranma back down the hall as fast as they could carry him.

"Aha! My beloved dost seek to lead me on a lover's chase! Very well, I accept!!!" Kunou pranced off down the hall after his quarry, still swinging the buckets.

Nabiki stood shocked for a moment, staring after the strange procession.

"Sorry, Ranma-baby. You're on your own this time..."

Hiroshi and Daisuke dragged their burden around the corner as fast as their scrawny legs would carry them. Ranma's legs, still numb, flopped uselessly in their wake, bouncing off the fire door frames. Ranma spared a glance over his shoulder.

"I love you!! I would date with you!!!" Kunou continued to gain on the trio, the water in his buckets splashing dangerously. A wayward splash hit the floor centimetres from Ranma's flailing legs.

"Oh, man!!! Faster, you fools, he ain't givin' up!!"

"Geez-" Hiroshi wheezed. "I can't keep this up much- gasp! Longer..."

"Me... neither..." Daisuke panted.

Ranma cudgled his brain, trying to think of a way, ANY way, to escape the love-crazed fool on his tail. With an almost audible pop, an idea hit him square between the eyes.

"Alright! Let me go!"

Hiroshi and Daisuke complied, collapsing to the ground in exhaustion. Ranma toppled forwards, only to catch himself at the last minute on his hands. With a grunt, he lifted his numb lower body off the floor into a handstand position, stomach muscles straining to maintain verticality.

Huffing and puffing, he tore down the stairwell on his hands at a remarkable speed, springing down to the ground level one flight at a time, Kunou no more than two meters behind him.

As they hit the ground floor, Ranma spun on one palm, cornering sharply and tearing off to the left. Kunou lunged around the corner behind him, buckets flailing as he skidded on the newly washed floor. Ranma looked up, only to see a spout of water arc upwards in a graceful trajectory straight towards him.

He scurried backwards on his hands, narrowly dodging the spray with a sigh of premature relief. Premature, since he failed to take into account the slipperiness of the newly-wet floor as his hands slipped, toppling him face-first into the puddle.

Kunou's eyes widened with glee as his Amazon Goddess revealed herself.

"At last! You shed your pitiful disguise and stand revealed before me!!! To me, my love!!!!"

He sprang forward, enveloping onna-Ranma in a full body glomp, being

sure to cop a good feel while he was at it.

"Aaaauugh! Get offa me!!!!" Onna-Ranma flailed her arms, sending blow after blow raining down upon Kunou's head.

"Never my lov-oouf!" Kunou exclaimed tearfully as several punches hit home. He redoubled his squeezing. "For your blows are mere love-taps to one such as I-Ergh!" Another strike connected. Kunou continued woozily. "For the Blue Thunder has heard your cry for his love, and he shall not disappoint thee!!!" He squeezed Ranma again for good measure.

A red aura burst into being around Ranma's prone form, the heat causing Kunou to loosen his grip somewhat. Ranma reached behind and over her shoulders and took a firm grip on Kuno's shirt. With a snarl, she tossed him halfway down the hallway into a row of lockers.

Kunou crumpled to the floor, arms outstretched, several bright purple bruises decorating his already-grafittied features. He managed to gargle out a last endearment before slipping into unconsciousness. Ranma dragged herself over to the wall and began to massage her legs.

"T-that guy is just... Scary!" Her legs were all pins and needles as feeling returned to the recalcitrant limbs. Staggering to her feet, she took off down the hallway, casting little glances back over her shoulder to assure herself that the pervert was indeed still unconscious. Oh MAN, she thought. Me an' Tofu're gonna have words over THIS...

Kasumi felt her muscles relax as she moved through her kata, her arms gliding gracefully through the air as she rocked back on the balls of her feet. Tai Chi was so very soothing...

The groceries had been squared away, and Father was installed in front of the shogi board across from Mr. Saotome. She'd served them tea and a light snack, knowing the two would be fine until late afternoon, then retired to the dojo, where she began the intricate, dance-like Art that her mother had taught within these very walls while she lived.

Kasumi had always preferred Tai Chi to the more violent arts of her Father's school. Kimiko Tendou, nee Kimiko Masaki, was also heir to her own family's school, though she'd never taught Masaki style Kendo to anyone but Father. Soun had passed a little of the Art on to Akane along with the Tendou Ryuu, but he'd only had a rudimentary grasp of the style himself.

A fine sweat broke out across Kasumi's skin as she completed her kata, bowing to the Dojo shrine then picking up her towel and gently mopping her brow. A quick shower to rinse off the grime, to be followed by a nice long soak before her younger siblings returned from school, and all would once again be right with the world.

A soft sound, almost a sob reached her ears. Kasumi turned, only to find Akane watching her, a strange, almost nostalgic look on her face. Her eyes were slightly puffy, and it looked like she'd been

crying. Kasumi walked over, alarmed.

"Akane? Shouldn't you been in class?"

"I...kind of didn't go in, today..."

"Do you feel ill? What happened?" Kasumi sat down and took her little sister's hand, drawing her down to sit alongside her.

"I got in a fight again. It's nothing. I don't understand why I'm crying, actually..." She attempted a laugh but it became instead another sob. Akane wiped her eyes angrily, trying to regain control of her emotions.

"Oh my! It was with one of those boys who were bothering you wasn't it? I'm sure they deserved to be taught a lesson..."

"No, not them..."

A suspicion crossed Kasumi's mind. Hesitantly, she gave voice to her fears.

"Was it Ranma?"

"No... Yes... Not really... Gods, I'm confused... I almost swung at Nabiki..." Kasumi stifled a gasp. "I lost my temper, and I don't know why... I haven't snapped at someone like that in ages and ages..."

"Did you... Akane, is Nabiki all right?"

"Yes, she's fine. I managed to pull my punch away at the last minute... Ranma helped, although I don't think he realized what he was doing..."

Kasumi exhaled in relief as Akane continued, almost mumbling.

"... I don't understand why I'm losing control like this... I'm usually calm under pressure; it must be these thrice-damned teenage hormones wreaking havoc with my thought processes..."

Kasumi pulled her sister into a hug, gently stroking her hair. Inwardly, she was very worried. Akane had always been... Well, a little rough and tumble. However, her recent behavior... One of the books Tofu-Sensei had lent her mentioned several stress-related illnesses and disorders that were really quite common in this day and age. Perhaps all the unwanted attention from the Horde at school...

"Akane... I've been meaning to ask you something. Yesterday, when you were sparring in the Dojo with Ranma... Why did you do that to her, er... him?"

"I was just trying to make him respect me! He always- They always, men I mean, they always look down on women, make us feel smaller than we are, even unintentionally. Daddy does it to you all the time... I don't think he's being deliberately mean, but I can tell it still hurts your feelings, right?" "Akane..." This was treading dangerously close to ground Kasumi wasn't comfortable traversing. "I don't think-"

"No, let me finish. I wanted to show him that this time, I wasn't weak, that I don't need to be 'protected'. I wanted him to treat me like an equal, the way I want to do with him. It backfired horribly, I know this now. He's too insecure about his curse at the moment. He'll need time to get used to the idea that women have power too. THEN he'll understand..."

"Akane, why are you telling me all this?"

"You asked, oneechan."

"No, I mean, you should be discussing this with Ranma. He's a bright young man, he'll understand..." Akane snorted derisively.

"That baka? No, I don't think he'd understand words alone. I tried to explain it to him this morning, but he didn't get it."

"Was this before or after the... incident?"

"Before... Although that dolt Kunou interrupted us..."

"Well, I think you should try again. Trust me on this, imotochan. If there's one thing I've learned in the past few years, it's that dirty laundry needs to be aired right away..."

Akane blinked twice and stared at her sister.

"Kasumi? Did you just make a joke?"

"Well, maybe I did." She smiled.

"Wow, Kasumi the jokester. Who would've thought?" Akane chuckled, then sighed. "Kasumi, I need to know something."

"What?"

"Why... Why did you take Ranma away from me?"

"Well, I... That is... Oh, Akane, I was just so worried! You frightened the poor thing out of his wits, and you were being so aggressive..."

"Is that why? Oh, thank the gods!" Akane said, relief tinging her voice. "It's just that... Well, I..." She paused for thought. How to cast her actions in the best possible light in Kasumi's eyes? "Kasumi, do you believe in love at first sight?"

Kasumi restrained herself from answering "yes I'm sure it happens all the time" and simply nodded. "Although many people confuse infatuation with love..."

"Yes, that's true. But I don't think that's the case here, oneechan. You see, I know Ranma. Really. In here." She tapped her chest over her heart. "He's brave, and honest, and caring..." She smiled teasingly for effect. "And handsome... I can't think of ANYone I'd rather marry."

Kasumi looked a little sceptical. "You've decided on this very quickly, Akane. Just the other day I heard you yell at Nabiki that

you hated boys. Why the sudden change?"

Akane cursed mentally. Her younger self had some odd opinions... Still, maybe she could play on the rumors that had swirled around her back then, er... back now.

"Well, you see, Kasumi..." Akane lowered her voice, as though she were slightly ashamed of herself. "Ranma is half GIRL..." She watched Kasumi's eyes widen through her bangs as she made the expected assumption. She didn't particularly care if her family thought she was a lesbian; after all, she loved Ranma no matter what form he was wearing.

Kasumi didn't quite know what to say, so she settled for a perennial favorite. "Oh my..."

"Kasumi, you won't tell Father, will you? He'd be so upset..." She put a little catch in her voice for effect.

"Of course not! Oh, Akane... How long have you known you were... like that?"

This was going a little further than she'd expected, Akane thought, feeling more than a little uncomfortable lying to Kasumi again. Still, she had no choice anymore, the die was cast...

"Oh, for a while now, I guess..." That was true, she thought. Ever since she realized that she loved Ranma despite his curse... That had to be, what? Two centuries? "I just don't want to miss out on my chance for a semi-normal life, you know?"

Kasumi nodded slowly. She could follow the logic. She felt she was missing something, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what... "Akane, it's not my place to approve or condemn your... sexual preferences, and I can see that you feel very strongly about Ranma, but... Well, I'll leave it up to him. I like him, but if he wants to pursue a relationship with you, I won't stand between you." Akane smiled happily. "But, I insist you apologize to Nabiki and Ranma. You need to control your temper, imotochan. You can't go flying off the handle at the drop of a hat," Kasumi finished firmly.

Akane nodded gravely. "I will, oneechan. Thank you for being so understanding."

"Akane, are you sure you wouldn't like to talk to someone about your feelings? About your anger, I mean." Kasumi clarified quickly.

"Like who?" Akane asked warily.

"Like a doctor, maybe?" Kasumi said, keeping her voice level.

"Ah, no, no oneechan, that's all right. I don't think that will be necessary..." Akane said, trying to sound reassuring. The last thing she needed was to get talking to a shrink. If she slipped up once and talked about Aramar, she'd be in a rubber room faster than she could blink.

"Are you sure? Because it's nothing to be ashamed of... You have been under a lot of stress, lately..."

You don't know the HALF of it, sister, Akane thought. "Kasumi, I'm _fine_. Like you said, I've just been under a bit of stress. I just need to apologize to Ranma, make sure he understands, and I'm sure everything will work itself out in good order..."

"Well, if you change your mind..."

"I'll be sure to let you know." Akane hugged Kasumi reassuringly. She stood and walked towards the house. "As a matter of fact, I think I'll go lie down for a while and take a nap. Wake me for dinner, okay?"

"Of course, imotochan..."

She entered the house, leaving a very concerned Kasumi behind her. Perhaps... Perhaps i'd best go have a word with Tofu- sensei all the same, Kasumi thought. Sometime soon...

Ranma slumped wetly back down in her seat. Her visit to the vice-principal's office had been just as miserable as she'd figured; the VP had gone on for the better part of an hour about scholastic duty and responsibility. Ranma'd barely managed to stay awake and remember to nod at all the right places.

She spared a glance to the rear of the room, flashing Hiroshi and Daisuke a friendly smile. Those two were all right, she decided. A little weird, but who was she to talk? The duo smiled back, maybe a bit too affectionately for Ranma's tastes. Ugh. That's gonna stop, and soon.

The rest of the day passed mercifully without incident, although Ranma had fallen asleep several times during various classes. Fortunately, his other teachers either didn't notice or didn't care, so she was spared bucket duty or another trip to the office.

He'd eaten lunch with Hiroshi and Daisuke, taking advantage of the free period to visit the showers and change back to guy-form, then visited with Nabiki and Hiroe, trying to ignore the whispers and poorly-hidden stares he drew from the student body. All in all, school was proving to be about as much fun as he'd figured, which was to say none whatsoever. And he still had to have a little chat with Tofu-sensei after school...

"Heya, doc." Ranma said neutrally, sitting down across the desk from his soon-to-be employer. "Funny prank, with the numb legs and all."

Tofu had the good grace to look embarrassed. "Er, yes... I'm really very sorry about that Ranma, it's just, where Kasumi is concerned, I don't really behave like myself..."

"Yeah, well, thanks to your little ha-ha, I ended up being molested by a crazy fruitcake today. Hope that tickles your funny bone..." He glanced around the room. "Say, what happened to your skeleton?" He

pointed at the empty hook where the bones had hung. "Sent it out to be cleaned?"

"Betty-chan? Oh, I'm afraid she, er... Met with an accident. I'm having a replacement shipped in this evening." He coughed nervously. "I really can't apologize enough for my behavior this morning, Ranma. It was inexcusable of me."

"Look doc, I realize you're sweet on Kasumi. And I already told ya I ain't interested in her that way. You ain't got no competition from me, I don't think I'm really her speed..." He sighed. "It looks like I'm gonna have a rough enough time of it in school anyway. I don't need no feuds makin' my life more complicated. Can't we bury the hatchet?"

Tofu exhaled, relieved. He was horribly ashamed of himself already, and the young man in front of him was being more than forgiving. He had to try to make amends, somehow.

"Of course, of course. My offer still stands, you know. I could use an extra pair of hands around here. My assistant is getting on in years, and I'm afraid she's not in the best of health. Would you at least consider my offer?"

Ranma thought about it, weighing paranoia versus a chance to contribute to his surrogate family's income... Not to mention the possibility of learning some of that funky shiatsu pressure-point stuff; that'd be a real useful addition to my skills...

"Hey, yeah, I could really use the job. I'll take it on two conditions..."

Tofu raised an eyebrow. "And they are..?"

"One, no more 'pranks'."

"Of course. And the second?"

"You teach me how to do some of those pressure point tricks, like the one you pulled on me. Pop neglected that part of my training. Deal?"

"Deal. I'm glad we could work this out, Ranma." Tofu smiled reassuringly. "Shall we begin Saturday? I open the clinic at nine, so I'll need you here for eight..."

"No problem. Thanks again!"

"Thank you, Ranma. I mean that."

***** _/Aramar, the 7th Age of Man_

They'd flown for several hours, stopping now and again on top of the odd rocky promontory to allow Akane to rub some feeling back into her cold-numbed limbs. Despite herself, she had begun to enjoy flying with the massive red-gold dragon. If it wasn't for the sheer bizarre unreality of this whole situation, Akane might have simply curled up in a ball and hid. That, or start breaking things... As it was,

though, Aramar, this world, this time, they were like some fever dream from which she couldn't wake. It was so deeply foreign, on so many levels, that the best thing she could think of to allow her to cope was to simply go along for the ride.

"Baron? How much further do we have to go?"

Not far, Akane-chan. The Western Magus' citadel is only a few hours away...

"Okay... Baron? How long did you know... her? My counterpart?"

Oh, a short time only. Perhaps a century, maybe two.

Akane goggled. "A century?! B-but... This body, it's barely older than Kasumi! How..?" She looked down at the wiry, sinewy frame her counterpart had left behind. It was strong, almost bursting with barely restrained power. No wrinkles marred the sleek perfection of her skin, yet scars from old wounds crisscrossed her frame. Except for the scarring, and the short hair, it was the type of body she'd long fantasized about having, and it was hers! Well, sort-of... "Is it... magic? Am I... Is my counterpart some kind of sorceress?"

Ha ha ha! No, no... I'm afraid your counterpart was not fond of magic at all! It was due to a mis-spoken spell that she ended up here in Aramar in the first place! No, she was no sorceress, child. She, too wondered why she never aged beyond young adulthood, but it was a mystery she never solved. I myself never realized it was unusual until she pointed it out, since I had never seen a human before meeting your counterpart...

"Are people really that rare here?"

Oh, there are many peoples in Aramar, child. Just not many humans. You are something of a curiosity, my dear. I had long believed that humans were a myth, something to frighten young drakes into remaining in the nest at night... My own Dam would warn me that if I didn't behave, the human knights would come and get me!

"Well, where I come from, it's dragons that are imaginary. Er, I think..."

Well spoken, child. Baron chuckled. *Dragons have existed since the beginning of time. When time ends, we'll lock the door and turn out the lights as we leave.*

"This Western Magus... Is he a dragon too?"

No, of course not. Mages use magic, dragons are magic. The Magus is an Ardrow.

"What's an Ardrow?"

They are a people superficially similar to your own, but with dusky skin and pointed ears. I think they must be related to your race somehow, just as I am related to my chromatic brethren. Your counterpart knew many of his race, both as friends and foes.

"And which was the Magus? Friend or foe?"

Both, at different times.

"Oh, terrific..." She sighed mournfully. "Well, I'm ready, Baron. Let's go."

*Very well, child. Climb aboard!"

They flew on westward, making but one more stop before the tall spire of the Magekeep came into view. The structure seemed as though it had been grown from the rock rather than hewn, the jutting, clawlike towers possessing an almost organic quality. The vast structure was perched high atop a pillar of weathered rock, the ground on which it rested lost in the mist. Akane swallowed hard as she looked down. She could barely see the tops of trees, some species of evergreen, poking through the thick pale fog.

As they approached, two winged forms detached themselves from the spires and flew towards them. Akane noted with shock that they resembled nothing so much as carrion birds with the heads of human women!

"Baron! What ARE those things?!"

Harpies, child. Do not fear, we are well known to them.

"Skraawk!" One of the harpies screeched, "Who comes?!"

"Two wayfarers, caw caw! Seeking the Magus!" The other squawked.

Greetings, Pinfeather, Talongleam. You know us, do you not? Baron sent telepathically.

"Awk!" Cawed Pinfeather, the one on the right. "The half-breed lizard and the Pale Lady! Do you come for battle?"

Here's your part, Akane. Remember what I told you... Baron sent along the private link between them. Akane nodded, swallowing hard.

"We come arms outstretched, holding only goodwill!"

The harpies laughed raucously. Talongleam shouted. "Begging favours from Our Lord again? Too rich, too rich! Go away! The Magus is indisposed, and will see no one!"

Baron, what now?

They merely toy with us, child. Speak the words I taught you.

"By blood and fire, we claim our debt owed! Do you dispute this?" Akane placed her hand on the pommel of her sword, hoping the harpies wouldn't notice the way her hand was shaking.

As it happened, the bird-women seemed to nod. "Aye, 'tis truly spoken. Very well, descend to the keephouse, the Magus will see you if he finds it convenient. Scrawwk!"

The two creatures flapped away, descending in great circles to the

largest of the towers, Baron following in their wake.

Well done, Akane. For a moment, I thought you were my old friend returned to me...

I'll try to take that as a complement, Baron...

They landed in a small (by dragonish standards, anyway) courtyard, and Akane climbed down from Baron's forepaw, rubbing and flapping her arms to restore circulation. She looked around, trying to seem nonchalant. Warm light flickered in small windows, candles, she assumed. No movement came, though. No one looking curiously at the dragon and human that had appeared on their doorstep. Perhaps the inhabitants of this place were used to such strange comings and goings...

After a long while of pacing, punctuated by occasional frustrated kicks at pebbles, Akane saw a door open at the base of the large structure at the south end of the courtyard. She glanced worriedly up at Baron, but he merely nodded his great head and approximated a smile.

Go on, child. I shall watch through your eyes...

Akane nodded and gulped air, before walking through the door with what she hoped was a purposeful stride.

Akane's eyes went wide as she took in the interior of the vast room. Tapestries woven from cloth-of-gold adorned the walls, thick rich carpeting muffled her footsteps. The hall was lit by warm torchlight, and a cheerful fire blazed in a vast hearth. The very brilliance, the sumptuousness of the room took her breath away. Suddenly, she felt very out-of-place in her steel armor and rough leathers, even more awkward than she had felt when she first appeared in her counterpart's body. This was the home of a prince, or an Emperor, she was sure!

In a shower of sparkling light, a tall figure materialized in front of the fireplace, tucking his flapping shirttail into his suede trews in a motion so very normal that Akane almost relaxed. He wore deep purple robes, and golden plates accentuated the broadness of his shoulders. And his face was so... so handsome! Long white hair swept back in a widow's peak from his high forehead, hanging down beyond his shoulders. Golden eyes glinted in a face that could have been sculpted from purest obsidian by a master artisan. Long, delicately pointed ears jutted out at right angles to the planes of his face. A warm, pearlescent smile spread on his features as he took in Akane's appreciative stare.

"Akane, my Pale Lady! So superlatively wonderful to see you again! Forgive me for making you wait, but I was temporarily indisposed..." As he said that, he set a small loosely bound text bearing the legend "Poor Wizard's Almanac" down on the mantle.

He moved towards her, not so much walking as flowing, and swept her up in his arms. She let out a startled squeak as he tilted her backwards, his face descending to her own.

"Now hey! Wait just a minute-"

Her protest was cut short by the press of warm, soft lips against her own...

***** END OF CHAPTER FOUR

NEXT TIME: Will Tofu put the moves on Kasumi? Will Kunou molest Ranma? Will Akane quit snogging the elf? Tune in next time, same fanfic time, same fanfic channel...

All C+C is gratefully received, either public or private, at catthouse@lweb.net or on the FFML!

QUICKIE AUTHOR'S NOTE: I THOUGHT the phrase "Horde O' Hentai" sounded familiar when I wrote it, and I've figured out why. It's actually the name of a fanfiction writing collective out of Manitoba, Canada. Check out their stuff if you can, it's tasty, especially if you enjoy citrus. Apologies to the ORIGINAL H.O.H. for stealing (borrowing?) your name.

5. Default Chapter Title

>THE BET- A STUDY IN SCARLET PART FIVE:
Original Bet Entry "A Study in Scarlet" by Gregg Sharp

>Continued (With permission) by Dave Menard
Flames, Comments, Questions? e-mail me at deibu_kun@sympatico.ca

>
DISCLAIMER: The Bet is Gregg Sharp's fault. Ranma is Takahashi's.

>Blame me for everything else.

>WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE: Too much to summarize here. The meat of
it is, Akane's mind has been switched with that of a much-older

>counterpart of hers, a warrior-assassin known as Scarlet who
hails from the distant future, where mankind has returned to an

>almost feudal existence. Ranma is engaged to Kasumi, an
arrangement that is confusing to both parties. While Scarlet is

>in the present attempting to woo Ranma, Akane is forced to deal
with the often strange repercussions of Scarlet's

>two-hundred-plus years of adventure in Aramar. For more in depth
review, go to <http://spghome.tripod.com/> for previous chapters.

>Gomen. Thus dies the grand tradition of ASIS synopses.

>IMPORTANT AUTHOR'S NOTE: The following fanfic contains
characterizations (most notably that of Kasumi) that differ

>significantly from what is generally regarded as "in character".
I respectfully point out that, having read 90% of the original

>manga and seen every anime episode released in North America, I
can find nothing in the source material that would invalidate my

>conceptions of the characters' back histories and motivations.
Those who disagree may mail me privately, of course,

and I'll be
>happy to discuss the matter. Otherwise, sit back, crack
your
canned beverage of choice, and enjoy.
>
PART FIVE BEGINS HERE!
>
 "Father, would you like a backrub?" Akane asked, kneeling

>down behind her parent. Soun looked up from the evening
paper,
pleasantly surprised.
>
 "Why, yes! Certainly, Akane, that would be wonderful."
>
 "Here you go..." Akane began to knead his shoulders, using

>all the knowledge of pressure points she had gained to put him
in
a relaxed, pleasant and (most importantly) highly suggestible

>mood.

> It was a risky, her latest gambit to win the affections of
Ranma
Saotome. In addition to the risk, it involved a severe blow
>to her pride; something she was loathe to give up. Yet,
didn't
True Love involve the sacrifice of pride on the altar of

>communication? A wise woman had once told her that love
means
ego-death. It would be painful, agonizing, even. Yet wasn't
Ranma
>worth even that sacrifice?

> "Aahhhh..." Soun sighed contentedly. _This_ was the true joy
of
having children.
>
 "Father..?"
>
 "Yes, my dear?"
>
 "I was wondering. About the engagement..."

>

>
 "Tsk. Now why won't this come off?" Kasumi scrubbed

>mercilessly at the scorch mark on the bottom of her
saucepan.
"Honestly, you use them once and they get blackened-"

>
 A loud crash derailed Kasumi's train of thought. "Now what

>on Earth-?"

> She left the pot where it sat soaking and picked up a
teatowel
to dry her hands as she wandered out into the living
>room where Soun sat having his after-dinner smoke. Akane, in
a
remarkable display of filial piety, was massaging his shoulders.

>
 "Father, did you hear that noise?"
>
 Soun nodded, a small smile curling the sides of his mouth.

>"Nothing to worry about, Kasumi dear. It's just Ranma
and
Saotome-kun doing their evening workout in the dojo-"
>
 "I see-" Kasumi said, worriedly. Whatever it was, it sounded

>messy...

> "Akane and I were thinking of taking a look ourselves. Would
you
like to come along, daughter?"
>
 "I- " Kasumi thought about what awaited her in the kitchen.

>"-well, why not?"

>

>
 "Hah! You're getting' slow, old man," Ranma taunted his

>father as he leapt over the burly man's head to alight in
a
defensive stance behind him. "Ain't'cha got nothin' up your
>sleeve tonight? I ain't even workin' up a sweat!"

> Genma growled and spun, unloading a flurry of blows at his
son,
who dodged and blocked them with ease, before catching a
>glimpse of Soun, Kasumi and Akane out of the corner of his eye.

> "Don't look now, boy," Genma hissed to Ranma, "But the big,
bad
tomboy is back-"
>
 Ranma glanced up and turned white. Genma sucker-punched him
>in the gut. Kasumi gasped, bringing a hand to her mouth in
alarm,
while Soun and Akane shook their heads, tsking.
>
 "Foolish boy, I told you not to look-" Genma said sadly as
>he watched Ranma fold like a cheap suit.

> "Auuuugh-" Ranma swallowed hard, barely able to keep
from
puking. Picking himself up, he tried to regain his feet,
>assuming a wobbly, weak-kneed stance.

> Genma chortled. "Looks like I'll have to retrain you from
the
beginning! Look at you. Weak as a kitten from a single blow!"
>
 On the sidelines, Scarlet smiled wickedly. She recognized
>that stance, even if Genma and her father missed it. The
old
panda-fool was in for a surprise-
>
 Five seconds later, it was Genma's turn to groan and suck
>air while he pried himself off the dojo floor. The three
Tendous
applauded.
>
 "Well done son!" Soun laughed. "Anything-Goes School secret
>attack, Drunk-fu! Why, I haven't seen that used for ages."

> Ranma smirked. "Yeah, well... Picked it up from Pop after
I
fished him outta the drunk tank in Kuala Lumpur one time... No
>surprise he don't remember teachin' it ta me."

> "Still very impressive, young man. If you and Saotome-kun
are
finished, Akane would like to have a few words with you."
>
 "Hanh?" Ranma blanched again, turning to Kasumi in search of
>a lifeline. Kasumi glanced over at Akane, who was looking at
her
pleadingly. With a hesitant smile, Kasumi nodded back at
Ranma.
>
 Ranma swallowed hard. "Uh, sure! No problem..."
>
 "It'll only take a moment, Ranma..." Akane said sweetly.
>
 Ranma swallowed again.
>

>
 Ranma walked into Akane's room, glancing around nervously.
>Two points of potential escape, easily reached. He
relaxed
somewhat. "So, uh... What didja wanna talk about?" Akane
had been
>alarmingly quiet as they walked up together, keeping her eyes
on
the floor in front of her.
>
 Wordlessly, Akane gestured for Ranma to sit on the bed. He
>complied, still not sure where this was going. If it wasn't

for
the fact that it was broad daylight, he'd have suspected she was

>going to try to jump his bones again.

> Akane got down on her hands and knees on the floor, facing
him.

Oh kamisama! He thought. She IS gonna try again! To heck

>with this! He was halfway out the door when her voice stopped

him
in his tracks.

>
 "Gomenasai, Saotome-san," Akane said, and bowed low,

>pressing her forehead to the floor.

> "Hunh?" Ranma blinked, his head ratcheting around to look
over his shoulder at the girl.

>
 "I'm sorry, Saotome-san. Both for inadvertently hurting you

>and for embarrassing you at school." She looked up at him,

her
eyes brimming with tears. "I acted in haste, presuming upon a

>relationship that did not exist. Please forgive me..."

> Ranma Saotome was a finely-tuned fighting machine, capable
of dodging bullets, catching arrows and deflecting steel

>shuriken. His pain threshold was astronomically high; he

could
withstand impacting into solid concrete from a height of fifty

>stories. He was as close to invulnerable as a human being

can
get, due to a lifetime of grueling martial arts training under

>one of the strictest teachers on the planet.

> The tears were what got him.

> Ranma never knew what to do about tears. They could throw
him, every time. People who cried were, according to the logic

>his father had instilled, weak. Martial artists didn't hit

those
weaker than themselves, therefore his primary means of conflict

>resolution was null and void. The tactical computer in his
brain, (which ran with an efficiency, speed and power equivalent

>to that of a Cray supercomputer) was caught in a logic loop,

and
proceeded to melt down into slag, leaving him armed with the

>admittedly inadequate Commodore VIC-20 computer that looked

after
his interpersonal skills. It booted up, went through a

>self-diagnostic (noticed some rather alarming gaps

in
programming, but went on with the bootup anyway) and supplied a

>response.

> "Hunh?" Ranma repeated.

> Scarlet took a deep breath and continued, determined to
finish what she had started. "My use of an obscure technique on

>your person during our sparring match was meant as a

compliment
to your skills; I had feared that without it, I would have lost

>to your overwhelming ability. Truly, I expected you to avoid

the
strike, or turn it aside as you had all my other blows. Again,

>you have my humblest apologies."

> "Ah... Er... " Ranma thought hard. As far back as he

could
remember, he'd never had anyone apologize to him. He

>double-checked the memory banks. Nope, not once. Desperate

for
some kind of answer to give the abjectly groveling girl before

>him, he improvised. "Er... S'alright, I guess. Forget about
it...
Can I go now?"
>
 Akane rose from her bow and wiped her eyes. "Only if you

>want to..."

> "Well, I, er..." He looked confused. "Was there somethin'
else?"

>
 Akane essayed a soft smile. "I was hoping we could talk

>about the engagement between yourself and my
sister,
Saotome-san."
>
 Ranma began to sweat. From one uncomfortable topic to

>another. Personally, he thought, I'd rather be back in the
dojo
bein' pounded by the old man. Unfortunately, some small,

>atrophied piece of Japanese manners within him wouldn't let
him
go, especially after this girl had made such a formal apology.

>"Ah, um... Okay, I guess... What _about_ the engagement?"

> Akane blushed demurely. "I was hoping... That is, if you
wanted
to..." Her breath seemed to catch in her throat. "I've
>spoken to Kasumi and Father... It's really your
decision
Saotome-san..."
>
 "What's my decision? An' can you please not call me

>Saotome-san?" He grimaced. "Ranma's fine, really."

> Akane looked up at him, eyes shining. "Ranma, I... I'm
very
attracted to you."
>
 "Yeah, no kiddin'?" Ranma said sarcastically. "I never

>woulda figured that out after you climbed into my bed
wearin'
nothin' but a smile..."
>
 Akane frowned, her veneer of uber-politeness slipping.

>"Sshh! Baka! The walls have ears!"

> "Sorry." Ranma winced. He didn't think he'd said that very
loud,
but you never know with these thin walls. "You were
>sayin'?"

> "I was _saying_ that I think I've fallen in love with
you..."

>
 Another meltdown. "Hunh?"
>
 "You're everything I've ever wanted in a man. You're

>handsome, and brave, and strong, and a GREAT martial artist..."

> Ranma puffed himself up a little. "Well, yeah, there ain't
no
arguin' THAT kinda logic..."
>
 "And the thought that I might miss out on a chance to have a

>wonderful man like you in my life because of some
silly
misunderstanding... Well, I just want you to reconsider your

>engagement to Kasumi."

> "What? Now look here! I ain't marryin' nobody, okay? I'm
just
goin' along with this until our Pops' come to their senses."
>
 "I know that, and I understand, but hear me out. Suppose,

>just SUPPOSE, for the sake of argument, that you do end

up
marrying a Tendou."
>
 "Ain't gonna happen."
>
 "For the sake of ARGUMENT, okay?"
>
 "...grumble..."
>
 "If you DO end up marrying a Tendou, would you rather spend

>the rest of your life with a woman who will marry you
because
it's her DUTY, or a woman who's madly in love with you?

>
 "..."
>
 Akane smiled as her point struck home. "Just think about it,

>okay? Nothing's set in stone. My father has agreed to go
along
with whatever decision you make, so long as you marry a
Tendou."
>
 "Look, I AIN'T-"
>
 "'You ain't gonna marry nobody', I get the idea. Just think

>about it, will you? No one's saying you have to pick me,
although
I'd be overjoyed, but you're going to have to pick one of
us. You
>may as well get used to it."

> Ranma grumbled something incoherent.

> Akane leaned forward. "At least give me a chance, won't you?
Let
me try to make you happy?"
>
 Ranma crumbled. She was right, it's not as if it would hurt

>anyone to play along. After all, this was only until Pop 'n
Mr.
Tendou wised up, right? "Okay, look. If we're gonna try this

>thing, me bein' engaged to all three of you, there's gonna
be
some conditions and, er, whatchamacallits, provisos. First, no

>more sneakin' inta bed with me. It makes me, well... nervous.
It
ain't right."
>
 Akane nodded. She'd given up on that plan already, anyway.

>
 "Second, you don't swing at my friends no more. You do that

>again, and the whole deal's off."

> "Ranma, I can't beGIN to tell you how sorry I am for that.
I
feel AWFul about it-"
>
 "It ain't me you gotta apologize to 'bout that, it's Nabiki

>an' Hiroe. You scared 'em, real bad. Don't you know
nothin'?
Martial artists don't pick on people weaker'n they are.
It's the
>Code. Even I know that..."

> "... He was patronizing her! Suck it up Scarlet, she
thought
furiously. You cooked the crow, now buck up and eat it...
>
 'Third... I ain't promisin' nothin'. I ain't the smartest guy

>in the world, but I know this ain't the best way to start
a...
a... whatever it is we're gonna start. Just... Gimme some

>breathin' room, will ya? It don't look like I'm goin'
noplac..."

> Akane nodded. It was better than him hating her, right?
Anything
was better than that. Even half an oaf is better than
>noneâ€|

>*****

>
 Just before the family sat down to dinner, Ranma drew Nabiki

>aside into the hallway. "I just had the weirdest
conversation
with Akane..."

>
 Nabiki narrowed her eyes. "No kidding. I heard."

>
 "You HEARD?! AW-Sh-"

>
 Nabiki quickly covered his mouth with a hand. "Quiet! Just

>listen up! Don't get any funny ideas, mister. I am not
your
fiancee, no matter what Daddy says. Got it?" Ranma nodded,

>rolling his eyes in a no-kidding! expression. "Good. Now
just
remember that, and I won't ever need to ask what my sister
was

>doing in your bed last night. Capiisce?" Sweating now,
Ranma
nodded furiously beneath her hand. "Terrific. You catch on
quick,

>Ranma-baby. I like you, better than I thought I would... But
I'm
not looking for a fiance right now, so let's just keep this
whole

>multiple-engagement thing on the Q.T., all right?" She
removed
the hand.

>
 "Yeah, gotcha..." Ranma whispered. "Lissen, 'bout Akane 'n

>me last night, I didn't-"

> "Just quit while you're ahead of the game, Casanova,"

Nabiki
smirked, eyes twinkling. Leaning forward, she pecked him
chastely

>on the cheek. "_That_ was for sticking up for Hiroe. She's had
a
tough time of things lately; I'm glad you did." Ranma blushed,

>rubbing the warm spot on his cheek Nabiki had just kissed.

> Distracted as he was, he was completely unprepared for
the
feeling of those same warm lips pressed against his own.

Nabiki

>pulled away, still smiling her crooked smile. "_That_ one was
for
sticking up for me." She wagged her eyebrows, spun, and went

>into the dining room, leaving a very stunned Ranma in her wake.

>*****

> A few days later, Kasumi hummed absently to herself as
she
walked to Tofu-Sensei's office. It was a habit she'd fallen
into

>whenever she was thinking deep thoughts. Tonight's dinner
had
gone surprisingly well. Ranma and his father had eaten
robustly,

>battling each other with chopsticks over the last scraps of
food.
Nabiki had scowled, called their behavior undignified, but

>Kasumi preferred to think of it as a compliment to her
cooking
skills. Father had made pleasant conversation with his
daughters

>and guests, and even Akane had joined in, despite the
awkwardness
between her and her sisters.

>
 Kasumi sighed happily. It was so much nicer when everyone

>got along... Akane had apparently apologized to Ranma, and he
was
being hesitantly polite. Not openly friendly yet, but a far

cry

>from the spooked young man he had been after that... incident
in
the dojo. Nabiki was a different matter, all false cheer and

>quick subject changes. She seemed rattled by Akane, but seemed
to
be trying to get over it. Whatever had happened between the two

>sisters, it was as bad as the time Akane had stolen
Nabiki's
favorite teddy bear when they were little. Nabiki had
seemed to

>forgive her sibling, but her eventual revenge (involving
Akane's
hand, a pail of warm water, bedding hung up to dry, a
camera and

>Akane's eighth birthday party invitations) had been great
and
terrible to behold.

>
The real tension in the air was due to Father's announcement

>the other day that he was giving Ranma a chance to pick his
own
bride; he was to be engaged to all three Tendou sisters,
pending

>a formal proposal to one of them. Nabiki had seemed
unsurprised,
as usual, but Akane was deliriously happy. Kasumi
wasn't

>surprised at that, considering what her baby sister had
confessed
the other day.

>
What truly confused her was her own feelings in the matter.

>On one hand, it took a great deal of the pressure off her. On
the
other, she couldn't help but feel a little jilted. Still,
Ranma

>hadn't rejected her outright, and continued to be sweet to
her;
it was her own fault, really, for agreeing to Akane's scheme.
She

>settled her mind by telling herself that Ranma was
probably
better served by someone close to his own age, and it
freed her

>up for dates...

>The question, of course, remained. Who to date?

>She was also concerned with the discussion she and Akane had
had
that day, where Akane had come out of the closet to her big

>sister. Kasumi really had no idea how to react to
this
information. She'd known one or two girls in high school who

>were... that way. One had even been a friend of hers, a
girl
named Mariko. It had rattled her when Mariko had revealed
that

>aspect of herself, especially under the circumstances at
the
time, a sleepover at a mutual friend's house. She and Mariko
had

>never really been that close after that. She could never
quite
figure out from then on whether Mariko's friendship had been

>sincere, or just a come on. It had really hurt Mariko's
feelings
when she had quietly dropped her from the circle of
friends she

>hung around with, and Kasumi had always felt guilty about
that.
Not guilty enough to attempt to rekindle their friendship,

>though....

> She blushed, embarrassed in hindsight at her actions. She'd
been very petty and scared, and had lost a good friend because of
>it. She mustn't lose her baby sister the same way, she resolved.
Even if things didn't work out between Akane and Ranma, she would
>be there for Akane, even if the thought of her doing... those
things with other girls made her extremely uncomfortable.

>
 Kasumi walked up the steps to Tofu-Sensei's clinic, and

>watched pleasantly as several people walked out, apparently
feeling much better. Tofu-Sensei could certainly work wonders.

>She was sure that he'd be able to help with whatever was
troubling Akane.

>
 Hiramake-san, the nice old woman that booked appointments

>for Tofu-Sensei waved her ahead.

> "How nice to see you again, Kasumi dear. The doctor is in
the examination room. Go right on back, we've had a rash of

>cancellations just now."

> "Thank you, Hiramake-san. And how is your son?"

> "He's doing quite well," she said proudly. "He's the top of
his class at Fujitake Business College. He sends his best, as
>always. Oh, I've been meaning to congratulate you dear, on that
nice young man of yours. Such an energetic lad, and quite

>handsome..." she added with a sly wink. Kasumi blushed. "He was
here yesterday talking to the doctor. The two of them spent hours

>in the lot behind the clinic sparring. It's so nice to see young
Tofu taking an interest in him..."

>
 "Oh, really? Well, that's wonderful!" Kasumi cheered up.

>Ranma was making friends!

> Kasumi nodded cheerily and walked into the examination room,
where Tofu was apparently doing some sort of inventory check of

>his acupuncture needles.

> "Konbanwa, Tofu-Sensei!" Kasumi said cheerfully. Tofu
started, sending the needles flying out of his hands into the

>ceiling, forming a strange pattern. "Oh, my! I'm terribly sorry,
Sensei, allow me to help you pick those out..." She leaned in to

>get a closer look at the needles. It was almost as though they
spelled out kanji...

>
 "No, no that's quite all right, Kasumi-chan," He said,

>taking her hand gently and guiding her away from the needles.
"I'll get them in a moment. Now, what can I help you with today?

>Feeling well, I hope?" She sat down demurely on the examination
table and looked down at her hands in her lap. His heart did

>somersaults in his chest. Thank the gods for whatever miracle was
allowing him to hold himself together... He might actually be

>able to ask her out...

> Kasumi smiled pleasantly. "Oh my, yes. Actually, I wanted

to
talk to you about Akane..."

>
 "Akane?"

>
 "Yes, I'm very worried about her." Kasumi frowned. Tofu was

>alarmed. Whatever it was, it must be bothering Kasumi deeply.
He
didn't recall ever seeing his goddess frown beforeâ€¦| "Her

>behavior seems... Oh, I don't know, a little...

extreme...
lately."

>
 "How do you mean? Is it... forgive me, Kasumi. Is it like

>your Father's behavior?"

> "No, no... At least, I don't think so... She's been
so...
aggressive."

>
 Tofu chuckled. Oh, was THAT it... " Kasumi, you must

>understand that Akane is an energetic girl. Tomboyishness
is
perfectly normal for a girl her age. She'll grow out of it

>eventually. Weren't you a rough and tumble girl yourself not
so
many years ago?"

>
 Kasumi blushed, making her all the more radiant in Tofu's

>eyes. "Oh, Tofu-Sensei, don't tease me. I wasn't THAT
bad..."
Inwardly she winced. Did that mean she was like Akane? One
of...

>them?

> "Kasumi, let me tell you a secret. When I took over
this
practice from Omara-Sensei five years ago, he warned me to
watch

>out for, and here I quote: 'The Terrible Tendous.'"

Kasumi
blushed a deep scarlet. "He warned me that he'd never SEEN
girls

>who got up to so much mischief. I can still hear him now."

Tofu's
mild voice dropped an octave, becoming gruff and bear-like.
"If

>it isn't the middle girl falling out of trees because she's
been
nosing around in other people's business, it's the oldest
girl

>with another sports injury, or the youngest with a split lip
or
bruised knuckles from fighting. I tell you Ono, they're

>terrors!'" Tofu chuckled warmly. "Imagine my surprise to
find
that these fabled hellions were simply bright, good-hearted
girls

>with active, healthy lifestyles, hmm?"

> Despite her embarrassment, Kasumi smiled. It was nice
that
Tofu-Sensei didn't think badly of them. Kasumi had been the

>captain of the girl's softball team at Furinkan, and had
always
enjoyed playing sports, even though she felt guilty about
being

>such a tomboy. Nabiki teased her that she overcompensated
by
acting like the perfect homemaker now that she had graduated,
but

>she couldn't help it. Her mother had BEEN the perfect
homemaker,
and Kasumi had always had the sneaking suspicion that
folks in

>the neighborhood had looked down on her for not living up to
her
mother's example...

>
 "Of course, Akane takes things a little further than you
>did, but she's a martial artist, and you were an athlete.
It's
simply a matter of different intensities... Now, is that all
you
>came to see me about?"

> "Well, I..." Kasumi shook herself, trying to regain
her
composure. "I'm afraid it's more than her usual tomboyishness,

>Sensei. She's been very quick-tempered and almost
struck...
another girl in anger. This isn't normal for her..." Her
voice
>trailed off, concerned. Tofu tapped a finger along his
jawline
pensively.
>
 "Well, I haven't actually seen her for a while, except for a

>brief visit a few days ago. Maybe we could make an
appointment
for her to come in for a check-up. I'm no behavioral

>psychologist, but maybe I'll be able to help..."

> "Oh, Tofu-Sensei, that would be wonderful! Thank you so
much,
I've been very worried..."
>
 "Nonsense, just doing my job... However, I would like to ask

>_you_ something..."

> "Yes?" Kasumi said, smiling pleasantly.

>Tofu swallowed hard, forcing the well-rehearsed lines to
his
mouth. "Kasumi, would you do me the honor of allowing me to

>take you to dinner sometime this week? Saturday, perhaps?"

> Kasumi was stunned speechless. Tofu-Sensei was asking her
out?
On a DATE? Has the world gone mad?
>
 Tofu saw the look of confusion in Kasumi's eyes and his

>heart sunk. She's going to say no, I know it, I do...

> "I... Tofu-Sensei, I don't quite know what to say..."
She'd
never really taken notice of Tofu-Sensei as a romantic

>prospect... She'd always said she did prefer older men, and
he
was educated, and had a terrific sense of humor... And now that

>his glasses weren't all fogged up, she could see he had very
nice
eyes€ Oh, but what about Ranma, er, the family honor?

>
 Tofu's heart screamed "SAY YES!! SAY YES!!!!" while his

>cowardly mouth said "Oh, that's all right, Kasumi, forget I
said
anything..."
>
 "Oh..." Kasumi said softly, her head a whirlwind of

>conflicting emotions. "I see..."

> "Foolish of me, really." He muttered. You are, after
all,
engaged..."
>
 Kasumi looked up, finally understanding the pattern in the

>needles on the ceiling. They spelt out "I love Kasumi"...
She
gasped.
>
 Tofu continued to ramble, not looking her in the face.

>"...And not to mention terribly irresponsible, an abuse of

my
position. I am, after all, your physician, and it would be

>inappropriate for me to..."

> "Yes." Kasumi said impulsively. Her eyes widened as she
heard herself speak the words. Where had _that_ come from?

>
 "I beg your pardon?"

>
 "Yes. I would be honored to have dinner with you,

>Tofu-Sensei. Providing my father and my iinazuke do not
object..."

>
 Tofu's eyes lit up. He knew Ranma wouldn't object, after

>all, the lad wasn't engaged to Kasumi by choice, he'd said as
much. And surely Tendou-san could be convinced...

>
 "You will? Really? With me? Oh Kasumi! You've made me so

>very happy!" He leapt to his feet, sweeping

Betty-chan's
replacement off her hook and began to dance around the room.

>

>
 Back at the Tendou home, Ranma was being stalked like a

>wounded animal. No matter where he ran, no matter where he hid,
his pursuers were there, waiting for him. He'd had to pound Kunou

>repeatedly throughout the day, then topped off by afterschool
training with Tofu. His muscles, though toughened by years on the

>road, were beginning to tire. Desperate, he practically dove down
the stairs, pausing a moment to glance back over his shoulder in

>terror. In that instant of inattention, his big toe found the
slightly loose board on the second-last step and he tumbled

>forward, barely managing to catch himself on his hands and
turning the faceplant into a tuck-and-roll combination that

>deposited him up against the back wall.

> In a twinkling, they were upon him, implements of torture in
their hands and preparing to pounce.

>
 "Gotcha now, Ranma-baby," Nabiki purred, brandishing the

>black suit she held in her hands. "Go get dressed."

> "Nuh-uh. No way. Not gonna happen..." Ranma muttered,
looking around for a means of escape. Too late, he was

>surrounded. Akane advanced on him with a hairbrush and a bottle
of cologne.

>
 "Aw, c'mon Ranma, it'll be fun..."

>
 "Nope. Ain't NO way I'm goin' dancin' with NObody. Dancin's

>for girls, anyway."

>
 "Fine." Nabiki splashed him with a glass of cold water.

>"Problem solved." She said smugly. "Now go get dressed."

> "Don' wannaâ€¦!"

> "Come ON, Ranma-baby," Nabiki teased. "I've got a few
dresses that'd look terrific on you-" She stared for a moment at

>Ranma-chan's impressive chest, then glanced down at her own more
modest endowments. "Uh, well, with a few alterations..."

>
 "NO WAY!! I-AM-A-GUY!!! Guys do NOT wear dresses, and
>before you get any smart ideas, we do NOT wear skirts,
either!"
She paused for a moment, remembering that Stewart guy Pop
had
>introduced her to when they were on their training trip. As
he
recalled, Stewart's school of the Art had been "Phuk Yu" and
had
>involved a lot of head-butting and kicking folks while they
were
downâ€| "Well, unless they're from Scotland, and I ain't
Scottish!"
>
 "Are you sure, Ranma-baby?" Nabiki purred. "'Cause you DO

>have red hair..."

> "AAAUUGGGHH!!! There will be NO dress, NO skirt, and NO
Ranma
goin' dancin' if you two keep this up..." She sputtered

>angrily.

> "Does that mean you'll go?" Akane chirped happily. "Oh,
that's
great!"
>
 "No, that ain't what I meant, I-"
>
 "Face it, Ranma-babyâ€|" Nabiki said with a smile. "You're

>coming with us. Cheer up! I'm sure Kasumi'll want to come
too..."
Akane frowned at that, but covered it well.
>
 "Aw, but..." He thought about that for a moment, remembering

>how Kasumi had looked the other night in her nightgown. Man,
she
IS pretty. Bet she's a really good dancer, too... "Okay,
okay...
>I'll come. But I ain't wearin' no dress!!!"

> The bantering continued unabated, as the debate shifted to
the
topic of which club to hit. Unbeknownst to the trio, they
>were being silently observed. A small figure lurked
underneath
the tatami flooring, a stethoscope held to the pressed
bamboo
>floormats.

> "Ah ha! So Ranma Saotome will be out dancing tonight!
Master
Kunou will be terribly pleased to hear THIS!!!" The little
ninja
>barely stopped himself from cackling with glee. He'd been
hanging
around the Mistress too long...
>

> Kasumi called out a cheery "Tadaima!" as she came in the
door
and stepped into her house slippers. Nabiki sauntered over,

>wearing her best "No, I'm not up to something, why do you
ask?"
look. Kasumi pretended not to notice, but put herself on
guard.
>
 "Hey, Oneechan. You want to come out dancing with me and

>Akane?"

> "Dancing? Oh, my, no. I couldn't possibly! And neither
should
you two, it's a school night..."
>
 "C'mon, Kasumi. Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud. Our

>iinazuke is coming..."

> "Ranma? Oh..." Her conscience took that as its cue to turn
on
the guilt switch. "Where is Ranma, by the way? I need to talk
>to him..."

> "_She's_ upstairs, getting dressed. C'mon, Kasumi,
please
comeâ€| You two can talk on the way..."
>
 "Oh, I don't know, Nabiki. What if Father and Mr. Saotome

>need me here? I can't very well just-"

> "Daddy!" Nabiki yelled. "Kasumi wants to know if she can go
out
on a date with Ranma tonight..."
>
 Soun and Genma appeared as if from nowhere, jubilant tears

>streaming down their faces.

> "Is this true, Kasumi?!" Not waiting for an answer, Soun
bulled
on ahead. "Oh, happy day! Yes, of course you can! By all

>means!"

> "Father, I don't think-"

> "Tut-tut, daughter. There's no need to apologize for wanting
to
spend time with your iinazuke. Now you two have fun, but not
>too much fun, if you catch my meaning..."

> Kasumi blushed fiercely. "Oh dear..."

> Ranma picked that moment to come down the stairs. She
was
dressed in her sleeveless white Chinese top and black pants.

>
 "Hey, what's goin' on? Why's everybody shoutin'?"
>
 Genma lunged forward to embrace his son/daughter.
>
 "Boy, you make your father proud!" He said as he clung,

>weeping tears of joy, to Ranma's legs.

> "Hey, get offa me!" Ranma cried as she crowbarred Genma off
her
legs. "What the heck are you talkin' about?"
>
 "Your date with my daughters!" Soun bawled cheerfully from

>his position in the hall. "Such initiative! You are truly
your
father's son!"
>
 Genma rubbed the back of his head modestly. "Well, now,

>Tendou-kun, I was quite a hit with the ladies in my younger
days,
wasn't I?" He chortled lustily, remembering. "But not as
smooth
>as you, Tendou!"

> "Ah, those were the days, weren't they, Saotome?"
Soun
reminisced wistfully.
>
 "They certainly were, Tendou..." Genma agreed.
>
 Ranma slunk past the twosome, lost as they were in

>nostalgia. She approached Kasumi apologetically.

> "Uh, sorry... I didn't... That is, this ain't supposed to be
no
date..." Nabiki elbowed Ranma hard in the ribs. "OW! Uh, not
>that I wouldn't want to go out on a date with you or
nothin'..."
She blushed. Kasumi smiled understandingly.
>
 "That's all right, Ranma-kun, you didn't hurt my feelings.

>Father tends to overreact, and it's really Nabiki who said it
was
a date..." She spared Nabiki a rare frown. "As it happens, I

>think a night out would be fine."

> Ranma gave a hesitant smile, but quickly covered it with
a
laugh. "'Course, since I'm goin' as a girl, it can't be a date,

>now can it? Hahahahaha..." She rubbed the back of her head
in
embarrassment.

>
 Kasumi gave another one of her patented indulgent smiles,

>stifling the image of Akane and onna-Ranma holding hands
and
laughing together. "Certainly... Oh my!" A look of alarm
crossed

>her face. "What am I going to wear?"

> "Leave it to me, sis." Nabiki said, taking Kasumi by the
arm.

"I'm sure we can find you some old rags..." And with that,

>she dragged Kasumi upstairs, leaving Ranma alone with
the
fathers.

>
 Soun leaned over and pressed a large wad of bills into

>Ranma's hand. "Now, you be sure to show my daughters a good
time,
understand? And don't worry about school in the morning.

>Saotome-kun and I can take care of letters to your principal."

He
looked like he was about ready to burst out in another crying

>jag. "All three of my daughters, engaged to be wed! Oh,
happy
day!!!" Streamers of tears issued forth. Embarrassed beyond

>belief, Ranma slunk away while the fathers consoled one another.

>*****

> Ranma and the Tendou sisters stood behind the velvet
rope,
glancing around nervously. Club Gojuushii was the hottest
club in

>Shinjuku, arguably the hottest club in Tokyo. All around
them
were the best and brightest lights of the Tokyo glitterati,
all

>jockeying for position; both in line, and for the cameras
that
flashed and popped like so many fireworks. Of the four girls,

>only Nabiki seemed to be at ease.

> "Relax, ladies. We're gonna get in, I promise."

> Kasumi glanced nervously at her younger sister. "Are you
sure?
Maybe this place is a little too upscale for us. I'm sure

>there are lots of nice places we could go closer to

home..."
Ranma and Akane nodded, a little nervous at all the
spectacle.

>
 "And what if they card us?" Ranma whispered.

>
 "Don't worry about it. Witness the joy of being a pretty

>girl; you get in places for free, and they never card
you."
Nabiki assured her calmly. "Look at us; how could they not
let

>four gorgeous women like us in?"

>
 Ranma looked at her companions. It was true; the girls did

>look spectacular. Nabiki was wearing an off-the-shoulder
emerald
sheath that hugged her curves, ending several centimeters
above

>the knee, showing her coltish legs to good advantage. Kasumi
wore
a light blue dress, flared at the hips with a high neckline.
Much

>more modest, yet it still couldn't hide her figure. Nabiki
had
managed to convince the older girl to let her hair out of her

>everyday white bow, and the chestnut locks hung loose and
lush
down to the small of her back. A little make-up and some

>glitter-paint, strategically applied, made
Kasumi's
already-pretty face stunning. Akane too had let her hair
down,
>the midnight-black strands glossy in the reflected neon of
the
Shinjuku streetscape. Most surprising of all was her dress;
some
>sort of shiny, satin-like material of a deep, incarnadine
red
color to her figure like it had been sprayed on, leaving her

>muscled yet still-feminine shoulders, arms and back bare,
while
covering her chest completely. The hemline was almost
indecently
>short; if she bent at the waist, her panties would have
been
visible to the world. Although, Ranma noted that since she

>couldn't see any panty lines there (not that she'd been
looking,
well, not much) she was taking the existence of said
panties on
>faith... Cunningly-applied make-up lent her deep brown eyes
a
seductive look that, combined with the easy confidence in her

>posture, gave the youngest Tendou an air of sexiness
and
sophistication far beyond her years.
>
 Ranma, for his part, was simply amazed that he was out with

>such stunning beauties. kamisama knew that his perverted
friends
Hiroshi and Daisuke would have killed to be in this
situation;
>three gorgeous girls, at least one of which had already made
her
desire for more... intimate relations more than clear. If only
he
>wasn't suffering from the feeling he was somehow
being
railroaded, Ranma might have been enjoying himself. The
entire
>situation was almost terrifying for the cursed boy. He
had
absolutely no idea what to do. In the space of a month, he'd
gone
>from having absolutely no female companionship (and
frankly,
little interest in girls at all) to an embarrassment of
riches.
>Of course, the ol' Saotome luck was holding true; the one who
had
practically thrown herself at him was the one who scared the
holy
>hell out of him. He wasn't sure what to make of Akane;
good
old-fashioned teenage lust was all twisted up with fear and

>resentment and other ugly feelings whenever he looked at her.
The
only other time he'd felt anything like this was with Shampoo.

>The frankly stunning Amazon had kissed him, (which had been
nice;
okay, better than nice. Really, really cool) then tried to
kill
>him. It was a good thing they'd lost her back in mainland
China.
One unpredictably violent girl was enough, thank you very
much.
>The only thing that kept him from bolting was the relative
safety
afforded by his girl-form.
>
 A girl form that was drawing a fair amount of attention on

>its own, he was annoyed to note. No less than five
itinerant
photogs had snapped her picture and handed off business
cards. He
>supposed that if he had to turn into a girl, he was glad that
it
was at least a cute girl, although that caused complications
all
>on its own...

> He'd dressed in a white version of his usual Chinese
tang,
figuring the loose clothes would allow him to downplay his

>girl-side's prominent assets and attract less unwanted
male
attention. He hadn't reckoned on the vagaries of fashion,
though.
>In a lineup filled with pretty girls in skimpy dresses, she
stood
out, drawing eyes she'd hoped to avoid. She was beginning to

>consider the merits of just changing back to a boy when
Nabiki
caught her attention.
>
 "Hey Ranma-baby" I think I figured out how you can make a

>little more money to help out around the house..."

> "Oh yeah?"

> "Uh huh. I couldn't help noticing all those photographers.
You
ever consider doing some modeling work?"
>
 Ranma scowled. "Ain't it enough that I'm workin' for the

>Doc?"

> Kasumi started guiltily at the mention of Tofu, but
said
nothing.
>
 "Well, sure, but modeling pays a lot more than being a

>man-Friday."

> "It ain't just the money that makes me wanna work for the
Doc,
y'know? He's teachin' me all kinds o' special moves 'n
>stuff. What'm I gonna learn posin' for some stoopid
pictures,
photo-fu?"
>
 "Well, just think about it, will you? I know some people, I

>could maybe broker you a better deal. Most of the
photographers
who work places like this'd just end up selling your
picture to
>pink-bill printers, and wouldn't that just be peachy?"

> Ranma shuddered. "Yeah, well, I'll think about it,
alright?
Anyway, we ever gonna get into this stoopid club?
Standin' around
>all night ain't exactly my idea of a good time, y'know..."

> "Mine neither," Akane interjected. "I wanna dance, don't
you?"
she smiled flirtatiously at Ranma, wiggling her hips
>cutely. Ranma blushed. Nabiki frowned at her baby
sister's
uncharacteristically coquettish behavior.
>
 "Look, I've got good connections, sure. But they're not that

>good. You've gotta be famous or rich to get on the list.
We're
not on the list, so we wait in line; that's the way it
works."
>She brightened slightly. "Places like this always let girls
in
first, though, so we'll be in soon, don't worry."
>
 As if in response, the major-domo stepped out the door,

>peering over the shoulder of the bouncers. He

glanced
appraisingly over the Tendous-plus-one and waved them forward, a
>lecherous smile on his weaselly features.

> "You four, go on in. Now, I got room for three more..."

> The crowd began to jump up and down, trying to get the
major-domo's attention as the foursome were escorted in by the

>two hulking bouncers.

> When their eyes had adjusted to the change in lighting, they
were frankly amazed. The club was huge, easily the size of a

>warehouse. Staircases led up to a second floor that overhung the
dancefloor, so that patrons could see and be seen. A deejay

>booth was inset in the far wall over the bar, strobes and laser
lights pulsed out onto the smoky floor, lending the entire place
>a surreal atmosphere. In short, it was the sort of nightclub you
saw in movies and T.V. shows, never in real life.
>
 "Oh my..." Kasumi breathed, taking in the scantily-clad

>couples writhing around in cages suspended from the ceiling.

> "Wow..." Nabiki sighed as she mentally tallied the costs of
various other patrons' wardrobes.
>
 "Ho-lee..." Ranma gaped at the sheer amount of people

>crammed onto the dance floor.

> "Damn..." Akane swore under her breath as she took the
opportunity to do a little sight-seeing. They don't call them the
>beautiful people for nothing, now do they?

>

>

> - Aramar, the 7th Age, Magekeep_

>
 Akane broke the kiss with a solid shove, sending the regal

>figure sprawling.

> "Y-you... Pervert! Keep your slimy paws to yourSELF!!" Her
sword was in her hands as she stepped forward, brandishing the
>weapon menacingly.

> *What are you doing, child?* Baron sent telepathically, his
mental voice frantic. *Surely you don't mean to-*
>
 Back off, Baron. This hentai freak is gonna pay! Akane

>sent back, a snarl twisting her features.

> The Magus crabcrawled backward, a look of astonishment on
his face. "N-now, Scarlet, love, I know we didn't part on the
>best of terms, but really, I-" His eyes widened as she swung the
deadly blade. With a flick of his wrist, a glowing barrier

>appeared between them, blocking the hammer-like blow. "I thought
you were fine with this, Scarlet! You said we could both see
>other people..." The sword struck once more, bouncing off the
magical shield. "Very well, that's enough of that..." He gestured
>once with his right hand. "_Freeze_."

> *Oh dear...*

> Akane froze, angry snarl still in place, sword held high
for

another stroke. A bluish glow suffused her as the spell
>paralyzed her. The Magus picked himself up and dusted
himself
off.
>
 "Whew... " He walked up to Akane's prone form. "If I release

>you, will you promise to settle down and discuss this like
an
adult?" Akane said nothing, The Magus blinked. "Oh yes, very

>well, you may speak..." The glow slid downward, freeing
Akane's
frozen vocal chords.
>
 "No WAY! Nobody does that to me and lives!" Akane snarled.

>She would have bit him, if she could reach. The Magus sighed.

> "Oh, buggery, I was just being friendly..."

> *Ahem. Lord Magus?*

> "Baron? Is that you, friend?" The Magus said aloud.
"Whatever's
the matter with Scarlet?"
>
 *That is not Scarlet, Magus. It is her temporal analogue's

>mind in Scarlet's body.*

> Comprehension dawned on the Magus' face. "Oh HO. Well,
that
explains much..." He approached the frozen Akane once more.

>"Miss, forgive me. Your analogue and I were... Close... for
a
time. I mistook you for her. Please be assured that I wouldn't

>dream of taking liberties with a woman without her
permission."
He bowed deeply. "Please accept my humblest
apologies..."
>
 Instinct (Akane smash pervert!) warred against reason in

>Akane's mind. The red haze faded from her vision as she
thought
the matter through. Honest mistake? Possibly...
>
 *He speaks the truth Akane. Please, put down your weapon

>before you do something you'll regret...* Baron sent earnestly.

> The anger slowly left Akane's face, to be replaced with a
wary
look, the sword falling from loosening hands to land in the
>thick carpet. "All right... But keep your hands to
yourself,
buster! I've got my eye on you..."
>
 The Magus smiled with relief, and snapped his fingers to end

>the spell. Akane stumbled forward for a moment then regained
her
balance, sending the dark-skinned wizard a rueful glance as
she
>sheathed her blade.

> At that moment, Baron forced his huge reptilian head through
the
doorframe and extended his neck into the room, ready to
>defuse any more conflicts with a puff or two of flame.

> "Good to see you, old wurm." The Magus said welcomingly. "I
take
it the young lady there is the reason for your unexpected

>visit?"

> *Yes, yes indeed. We seem to have had a slight mishap with
a
wish spell...*
>
 "Tsk-tsk... Scarlet was never very good at those, was she?"

>
 No, I'm afraid she wasn't...

>
 Akane cleared her throat. "Can we please stop talking about

>me like I'm not here?"

> Baron had the good grace to look mildly embarrassed.

*Ah,
forgive me. Magus, meet Akane Tendou, late of the Nerima ward of

>Tokyo, Japan. Akane, this is the Western Magus, and these are his
demesnes.*

>
 "A pleasure my dear. Your reputation precedes you." The

>Magus bowed with a flourish, almost kissing Akane's hand before
apparently thinking better of it. Akane smiled half-heartedly and

>bowed politely, never taking her eyes off the flamboyant figure
in front of her. His flowery speech reminded her a bit too much

>of Kunou, but for some reason it seemed more natural coming from
the Ardrow. Maybe it was the exotic surroundings...

>
 "Thanks, I guess," Akane mumbled.

>
 "So, how in the names of the Nine Gods did you come to be

>switched with our dear Scarlet?" The Magus took a seat, gesturing
for Akane to do the same. Baron lay his vast head in front of the

>hearth, smiling reassuringly.

> "Er, I... It was all her fault! She cast some kind of stupid
time travel spell, only she ended up stealing my body! And I

>ended up..." she gestured vaguely, "Here..."

> "Ah." The Magus nodded, glancing over at Baron. "This was
the spell she sought for so long, eh? She finally found a way

>homeâ€|" He steepled his fingertips pensively. "But once again,
things go astray... The great Curse of Murphy strikes once

>more..."

> Akane blinked, a little confused. "Ah, yeah, I suppose..."
But what about me? Baron said that you might be able to switch us

>back. Can you?"

> The Magus chuckled softly. "I'm not sure. It depends. I
might be able to, if the Rules haven't taken hold of you yet. If

>they have..."

> "Rules?" Akane asked. "What rules?"

> "It's fairly hard to explain, Scar- er, Miss Tendou. The
Rules are what resulted in Scarlet being trapped here for so

>long. If she hadn't fallen prey to them so quickly, a competent
planewalking Mage could have easily sent her home. Look, I'll try

>to put it to you as simply as possible. When people from Outside
enter Aramar, they become subject to certain Rules, like the

>local laws of physics. For instance, Magic is very powerful here,
whereas I'm given to understand that it is rare indeed in your

>world. The Rules are like magical laws of Nature, or rather,
human nature. When Scarlet first came to Aramar, her actions led

>her down a path that she perhaps did not want to follow, shaping
her into a warrior and assassin."

>
 Akane paled visibly. "I was a killer? How- why?"

>
 The Magus sighed. "Scarlet's first actions in this world
>were ones of violence. She always maintained that she took
those
actions in self-defense, and that may well be true. I do not
>know, I wasn't there. However, the violence eventually
consumed
her, limited her, caused her to become a _creature_ of
violence.
>This is not to say that she was truly an evil woman. Indeed,
she
was capable of moments of great compassion and solicitude, but
at
>her core, she was a killer, and a very capable one. We have
an
expression in Aramar: As without, so within. In this place, a

>person's behavior determines their fate."

> Akane raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that the case anywhere?"

> "Not to this extent. Had you succeeded in harming me
earlier,
you might well have doomed yourself to walk the same
>path as your analogue. Have you done anything since you've
been
here that would predispose you towards this fate?"
>
 "I don't think so..." Akane looked up, a little worried.

>"Baron?"

> *Well, you HAVE been whining a lot...* Baron sent,
his
telepathic voice dry.
>
 "I don't whine!" Akane whined. "Er... Well, I try not to..."

>
 The Magus chuckled. "Well, I honestly can't see how

>dangerous that would be. But perhaps you should make an effort
to
be on your best behavior from now on."
>
 Akane nodded, swallowing hard. She would permanently become

>whatever she acted like? That's not good, not good at all...
"But
you said you might be able to send me back, providing these
Rules
>haven't affected me much... So can you?"

> "I can try, Akane... I just don't relish facing Scarlet if
I
succeed... She won't be very happy with me..."
>
 A bell-like chime sounded, causing the trio to look up.
>
 "Ah, I see my lady has noticed my absence. Servitor?" The

>Magus stood, speaking into the air.

> A disembodied voice answered. "The Mistress asks to be
admitted,
Master. Is this acceptable?"
>
 "Yes, show her in... Warn her that we have guests, and see

>that she is appropriately clothed, hmm?"

> "At once, Master."

> "Baron, Akane, I have the immense pleasure of introducing
the
Lady Kiira, my apprentice. Come in, my dear..."
>
 A feminine form shimmered into existence in front of one of

>the tapestries, She was shorter than Akane, but finely dressed
in
a set of silk robes that hugged her curves, displaying them to

>best advantage. She was perhaps as attractive as the Magus,
but
in a sensual, animalistic way. Her long russet hair was held
back
>in a braided ponytail that hung over her shoulder to the small

of
her back, while curling tufts concealed the delicate points of

>her ears. Her skin seemed tawny, almost golden, and it shimmered
oddly in the firelight. As she drew closer, Akane realized that

>this was because a fine layer of soft golden fur covered
Kiira's skin, decorated along the hairline and across the tops

>of her breasts with delicate rosettes of dark fur. Akane realized
with a start that this woman wasn't human, or an Ardrow. She

>glanced over at Baron, seeking help, but the Dragon merely looked
startled, as though he knew this woman. Kiira's eyes grew wide as

>she took in the two guests, her pointed irises widening in the
firelight.

>
 She stepped hesitantly towards Akane, a look of surprise on

>her face.

> "Momma?"

> Akane went white. "WHA-AAT?!"

> The felinoid rushed forward and tackle-hugged Akane,
knocking her to the floor.

>
 "Oh Momma! You said you were going away! I'm so glad you

>came back, I missed you! Did you find Ranma? Is he here? Can I
meet him? Don't be mad at me, I KNOW you don't like magic, but

>Issok SAYS I've got an aptitude for it, and I never WAS as good a
fighter as you were..." Kiira's voice petered out as she realized

>her affectionate hug was not being returned. "What's the matter,
Momma? Are you THAT mad at me?"

>
 "I-er... Huh?" Akane said intelligently. "Who..? MOMMA?" She

>stood up forcefully, spilling the felinoid onto the floor as she
rounded on Baron and the Magus. "WHAT IN KAMISAMA'S NAME IS GOING

>ON HERE?!"

> The Magus looked as shocked as Akane. "You two...

Momma?
'Prentice, what is the meaning of this?" Baron sighed, rolling

>his golden eyes skyward. Kiira merely looked confused.

> "Momma? What's wrong? Don't you recognize me? It's Kiira!"
The young woman was almost in tears. "Uncle Baron? What's wrong

>with Momma?"

> "Would SOMEBODY kindly TELL me what's going ON here?!" The
Magus sputtered, looking from Akane to Baron to Kiira like a

>spectator at some demented three-way tennis match.

> "Sorry, Issok." Kiira said softly. "This is my Momma! I
didn't know you knew her..."

>
 "Knew her? KNEW HER?" The Magus fumed. "By the Nine Gods,

>why didn't you TELL me she was your mother?" He rubbed his
temples furiously. "'Prentice, I... Ye GODS, what a mess..."

>
 "Umm..." Akane attempted to interject.

>
 "It's not my FAULT, Issok! You never ASKED!!!"

>
 "Err..." Akane tried valiantly once again.

>
 *Honestly, Kiira! You KNOW how Scarlet feels about magic!

>How could you go against her wishes like this?* Baron scolded.

> "Excuse me..." Akane held up her hand plaintively.

> "...Her DAUGHTER! I can't BELIEVE it! She'll KILL me..."

> "ENOUGH ALREADY!!!!!" Akane bellowed, stopping the trio in
their tracks. With an audible creak, all three craned their necks

>around to look at her. "THANK you!" She took a deep breath,
closed her eyes, and counted to ten. Remember the Rules, she

>thought furiously. Don't lose your temper... "Now, if we can just
sit down and discuss his like rational people..."

>
 The other three complied, eyes wide.

>
 Akane opened her eyes and exhaled. "Now, miss, I'm gonna

>make this clear from the start. I'm not your mother."

> "I know THAT..." Kiira said, laughing. "You're my
foster-momma, have been since I was a kitling. You took care of

>me after my mother died."

> Akane sighed in relief, a sound echoed by the Magus. "I'm
glad that's settled. Now, Kiira, right? Kiira, I need you to

>understand that I'm not the same person you think I am. My name
is Akane Tendou. NOT the same Akane Tendou you know. I'm stuck in

>your 'momma's' body, and she's stuck in mine."

> "Total etheric transference?" Kiira said, her eyes

widening.
"But that would require a spell of extraordinary power! Are you a

>temporal or dimensional analogue? How do you account for the
disruption caused by the Artichoke Effect?"

>
 Akane blinked hard, understanding maybe one word in three.

>"Hanh?"

> The Magus beamed proudly. "See? I TOLD you she has an
aptitude..."

>
 Akane shook her head. "Never mind all that now. I just want

>to go home as soon as possible!"

> "Go home?" Kiira asked. "But you just got here! I can't WAIT
to show you around!" She beamed, displaying impressive yet still

>dainty fangs. "This is terrific! I thought I'd never see you, er
Momma, again, since she went back to find Ranma..." Kiira paused

>as she saw Akane's mouth harden. "Oh, right, you probably want to
go home to YOUR Ranma, right?"

>
 "Who IS this Ranma guy, anyway?" Akane spat. "I've never

>even heard of him, but I already hate him. It's all his fault
that other me stuck me here in this godforsaken-"

>
 Akane... Baron cautioned. *Temper...*

>
 Akane visibly tensed, trembling. "Right," she said tersely.

>"Calming down..."

> "You don't have a Ranma?" Kiira said sympathetically.

"Oh,
that's too bad. Momma said he was the great Love of her Life..."

>
 "Really?" Akane said, interested despite herself. Her

>analogue had spent her whole life trying to get back to this
person...

>
 "Oh yeah, definitely. She said he was handsome, and brave,
>and kind..."

> "How did she meet him?"

> "She said her Dad engaged them."

> "An arranged marriage? Daddy did THAT?! That's stupid!
That's
idiotic! That's... " She sighed. "Okay, I can see Daddy
>doing that. And she LOVED him? I HATE boys... What? Why are
you
laughing?"
>
 "I'm sorry..." Kiira said, stifling her giggles. "It's just
>that Momma always said she... How did she put it? She said
she
was in serious denial thanks to someone called Upperclasshole
>Kunou and the Horde of Hentai..."

> "Upperclass..." Akane giggled. "Oh, that works... I mean,
NO!
I'm not in denial! Boys are stupid perverts!"
>
 "Uh huh, sure thing. Momma also used to talk about a
>Tofu-Sensei. That ring any bells?"

> "That's different!" Akane shouted, blushing. "He's a man!
Boys
are boys and men are men! They're practically two different
>species!"

> "Oh, well then." Kiira said in a teasing voice. "That
explains
EVERYthing..."
>
 Akane growled something unintelligible.
>
 "Do you mind if I ask you something?"
>
 "What?" Akane snapped.
>
 "How old are you? I mean, how old are YOU?"
>
 "Sixteen."
>
 Kiira's eyes went wide, then she started to giggle again.
>
 "What?! Dammit, why are you laughing THIS time?"
>
 "I'm older than my Momma! Woo-hoo! Oh, this is hilarious!"
>She managed to collect herself, wiping her eyes. "Okay, well,
you
gotta understand something. TRUST me, boys AND men are both a
lot
>of fun. Just because the ones you've met so far are
idiots,
doesn't mean that they ALL are. Momma always said that
Ranma was
>the most manly boy she ever knew..."

> "I'll bet..."

> "Well, if you're so stuck on hating boys, you're in luck!
Ranma
tuns into a girl!"
>
 "WHA-AAT?"
>
 "Momma said he got cursed to turn into a girl when he got
>hit with cold water, and to turn back when he hit was hit by
hot
water. Some kind of were-wench, Issok always said, even though
he
>and I BOTH know it could only have been a
high-level
transmogrification spell with a variable trigger, the
type that
>you generally find around Wild Magic areas and other class
three
subdimensional-" She noticed Akane's blank expression. "What?
Am I
>getting too technical?"

> "I think my brain has finally melted down." Akane mumbled.
"I

could have SWORN you said that Ranma turns into a girl."
>
 Kiiira nodded.
>
 "Cross dresser?"
>
 Kiiira shook her head. "Nope, like I said, magical curse. It

>wasn't his fault, you know..."

> "And I... She... was in LOVE with this guy?"

> "Oh yes, very much so."

> Akane swallowed hard. Could it be true? Was she destined to
fall
in love with a... a... freak?
>
 "This is... A little too weird for me to take in right

>now..." Akane whispered. "What am I saying? This whole WORLD
is
too weird for me to take in! I want to go HOME!!!!"
>

>

>
 Well, that's it for part five. Tune in next time, as Scarlet

>and Ranma cut a rug, and Akane begins the long voyage home in
a
story I had to call "Shall we Dance?" or "Buckaroo Tendou Across

>the Eighth Dimension!" Well no, I didn't HAVE to call it
that,
but I felt like it. Ja!
>

>Dave Menard

>Fanfiction page:
<http://spghome.tripod.com/>
> <p><p>

End
file.